



# managed grazing for dairy profits

## Tomandl farms

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### Introduction

Tomandl Farms are operated by Joe and Christy Tomandl. The farms straddle the border of Marathon and Taylor Counties in central Wisconsin and are made up of their home farm, which they began farming as a managed grazing dairy farm in 1998; and a second farm called Legacy Dairy, LLC that they bought and converted to grazing in 2010. The home farm has been operating as a sole proprietorship since its inception in 1998. Legacy Dairy was set up as an LLC so it could provide some independence and offer the possibility of either bringing in outside investors or transition to another family in the future.

Before starting Tomandl Farms, Joe and Christy were teaching high school agriculture in Mishicot, Wisconsin. They made the decision to start their own grazing farm

near Joe's family farm, which is about a mile away. Joe's family had been successfully using managed grazing since the late 1980s so they were fully aware of the route they were taking. Rather than buying a fully operational farm, and incurring the overhead costs for an older system, they decided to take on a farm that had been sitting idle with minimal infrastructure. They gradually transitioned it to a grazing farm and retrofitted the old barn with a low-cost New Zealand style swing parlor.

The Tomandls see family scale dairy farms as an important part of healthy rural communities and grazing dairy farms as the best way to assure that can happen. They originally started out thinking they would demonstrate managed grazing and share their experiences with others. In 2010, when a neighboring farm came up for sale, they saw an opportunity to expand their farm operation in a way that would allow for another family farm to eventually be spun off. Having the two farms also allowed them to convert to organic dairy production one farm at a time, starting first with the home farm in 2016 and then Legacy Dairy in 2017.

## **Herd and milking**

In 2017 the combined farms that make up Tomandl Farms were milking about 288 cows and shipping about 12,424 pounds of milk per cow. As of January 2018 they had 92 calves, 94 bred heifers and 6 dairy bulls on the two farms. Until recently they were a spring seasonal herd but as the organic dairy industry has increased the demand for winter milk, they have been milking a small herd through the winter on one of the farms. This practice meets the winter demand and makes better use of skilled employees they've attracted and trained.

When the Tomandls first started out they were milking smaller framed Jersey cross cows. Over the years they tried all kinds of different breeds. They have gradually transitioned to New Zealand Friesian genetics. The Tomandls believe their breeding has provided them with the type of cows that works best in their operation. Mature weight per cow is around 1100 pounds. Milk production characteristics are 3.4% protein, 4.2% butter fat and 5.2% milk solids. Their milking herd is fairly young, averaging around 4 to 5 years of age. Historically, they have been able to keep their annual culling rate around 15%.

Although they are considering switching to a strictly grass fed operation to take advantage of the growing market demand for grass milk, they have typically supplemented the milking herd with 9 pounds of grain per day.

When the Tomandls started out they were outwintering their cattle and milking them twice a day in a home built New Zealand style swing 16 parlor. As the farm and equity grew, at the home farm they were able to add a cement feeding strip with headlocks that was eventually enclosed in a bedded pack barn. This eased up the pressure early in the spring on the lanes and pastures and improved animal performance since they didn't have to deal with the harsh winter and early spring weather. When they started Legacy Dairy, they immediately installed a swing 24 parlor and put up a three-row sand-bedded freestall barn.

## **Pasture and land management**

Between the two farms the Tomandls own 448 acres and rent another 450 for both grazing and

mechanically harvested forage. Eighty five of those acres are in forest land and they graze about 620 acres. Forage is harvested from some of the grazing acres and the remaining ungrazed acres either as dry hay or haylage, both baleage and covered piles.

During the typical 185-day grazing season they move the dairy herd every 12 hours and try to allow a 30 day rest period, depending on the growing season. To help manage the animal pressure on the pastures and smooth out animal performance they will also supplement forages with a TMR.

The predominant grass species in their pastures are bluegrass, quackgrass, orchardgrass and timothy; and the forages tend to be red, white and kura clover. In an attempt to keep a 25-30% stand of legumes in their pastures and maintain some grass diversity, every year they'll use a no-till drill on 20-30% of the pasture acreage to incorporate in meadow fescue, festulolium, red clover, perennial ryegrass and white clover.

Over the years they've planted a few rented acres to corn for corn silage but have found it better to focus on harvesting high quality perennial forages as hay and/or haylage.

## **Marketing and financial management**

The Tomandls have been in constant development mode since the beginning. When they first started they were looking at using solely family labor, but after finding an excellent employee they started to think differently. With quality staff the farm could grow a bit more. Initially the employee just helped at the home farm but in 2010 two things happened. First, as was mentioned earlier, a farm came up for sale that would let them grow their business but in a modular approach. Their employee had demonstrated his ability to manage a dairy herd so he was ready to take the lead on the new farm. The Tomandls were then faced with the challenge of finding some additional help at the home farm. The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship organization began in 2010, opening a pathway for new staff to come on board. With high quality, committed staff, further development could continue.

Rather than grow the business in size, the Tomandls have used the additional management skills of their staff to transition the farms to organic. Now they are considering moving to 100% grass milk. Throughout this transition feed costs have always been a challenge. When they were a seasonal grazing herd selling milk to the conventional market, it was easier to source low cost hay to see them through the winter months when they were drying off the herd. Anything the cows didn't eat became bedding.

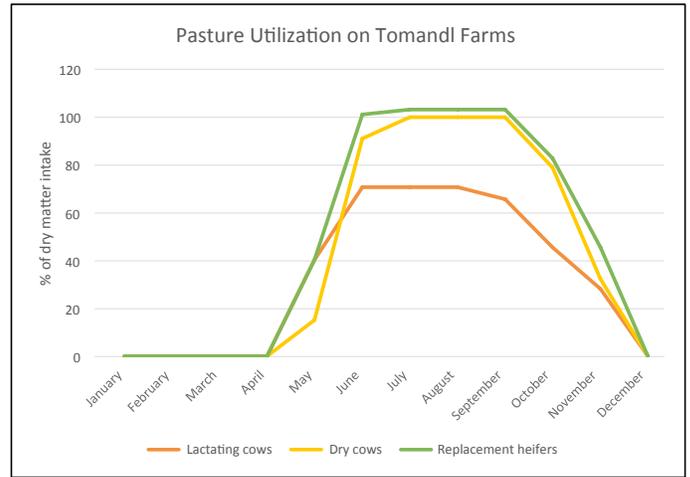
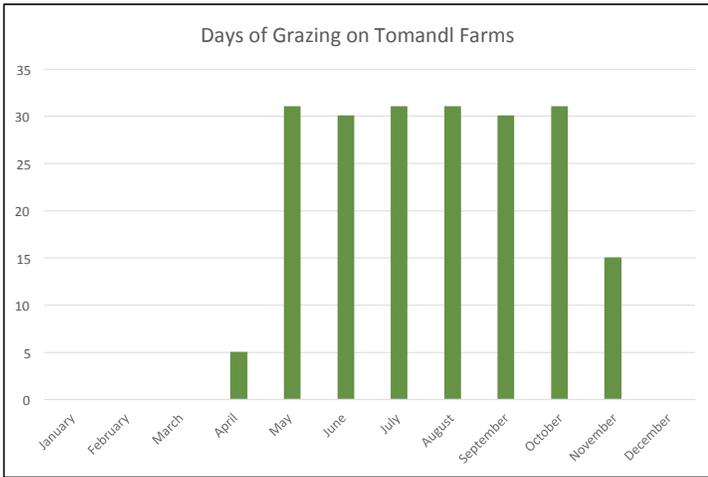
Making the switch to organic has definitely changed things. Organic feed is much more expensive, so cutting down on waste has been extremely important. Over the past year they improved their TMR feeding equipment and skills to do a better job of handling feed and meeting nutritional needs. They have also invested in facilities to protect the feed from spoilage so they can buy in bulk when they can find the right sources. Making the transition to organic grass presents even more challenges since forage quality becomes extremely important in order to meet the needs of both the cows and the customers.

The Tomandls have used the Risk Management Agency's Pasture, Rangeland, and Forage (PRF) Pilot Insurance Program to mitigate some of the risk of not being able to grow enough forage, with mixed results.

### Summary and key points

Milking moderate size cows selected for grazing; establishing and developing permanent, resilient pastures; investing in equipment and buildings that run efficiently; shifting production systems slowly to meet the changing dairy market; hiring and developing quality employee-managers; and growing the farm through a modular approach have been key features of the Tomandl's operation. While some grazing dairy farms have seen grazing as an effective way to maintain their lifestyle and business, the Tomandls have seen it as a way of growing their business and keeping family scale dairy farms that blend into and work within the local environment as an integral and vital part of the rural community.

Monthly Grazing on the Tomandl Farms				
Month	Days of Grazing	% Dry Matter Intake (DMI) from Grazing		
		Lactating cows	Dry cows	Replacement heifers
January	0	0	0	0
February	0	0	0	0
March	0	0	0	0
April	5	0	0	0
May	31	40	15	40
June	30	70	90	100
July	31	70	100	100
August	31	70	100	100
September	30	65	100	100
October	31	45	80	80
November	15	30	30	45
December	0	0	0	0



Testing Dairy Financial Risk through Grazing and Insurance. 2018. Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group, Green Lands Blue Waters. [www.greenlandsbluewaters.net/dairy.html](http://www.greenlandsbluewaters.net/dairy.html). Study conducted with funding from USDA-Risk Management Agency.

*This project was conducted by members of the Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group of Green Lands Blue Waters, with funding from USDA-Risk Management Agency.*

