

# Keeping it Simple

*OYDCs Tom & Dianne Cook transition from a traditional dairy operation to grazing and seasonal breeding*



When a massive outbreak of contagious staph mastitis threatened to cripple their farm, 2006 MMPA Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators Tom and Dianne Cook took a long look at their management practices. After plenty of research and the financial bite of culling nearly a fourth of their milking herd, the couple chose to transition their traditional dairy operation into one that utilizes grass-based grazing and seasonal breeding.

“Tom did a lot of research when we decided to switch to grazing,” Dianne says. “He goes to many winter grazing meetings and reads a lot on the subject.” For advice, he turned to nearby MMPA member Howard Straub, Jr., of St. Johns, who had already been grazing his cows for several years.

“I realized I did not want to do this (traditional dairying) for 30 years, so I took Howard Straub’s advice and went to grazing,” Tom says.

Executing the transition required planning, patience and flexibility on the Cooks part. Tom started by mapping out areas on their 538-acre Pewamo area farm that would be converted from farmland to pasture. With Michigan’s harsh winters, he also needed to make sure he had enough cropland to grow feed for the winter months and to supplement the cows during the transition.

“For the first two years, people told us to keep it simple,” Tom says.

“We learned how to supplement the cows properly to get a little more milk production to make the farm more profitable.”

Both people and cows had to learn a new way of doing things during the changeover to grazing. The people had to learn how to manage pastures and utilize moveable fencing while the cows had learn how to eat grass, move from pasture to pasture and find their way back to the barn for milking time.

“It was hard on the cows at first,” explains the Cook’s oldest daughter, Cameron, 8. “But then they got used to it.”

As the grazing and feeding program evolved, Tom decided to continue supplementing the herd year round with a TMR. The cows are offered feed before and after they come in to milk twice a day. This keeps feed in front of the cows nearly 24 hours a day and also reduces the chance of bloat, which can occur when cows are only offered pasture.

“Each farm is unique when it comes to grazing and I had to learn what worked best for our operation,” Tom says. “Finding how best to complement the milk cows on pasture with a TMR was a real challenge.”

The farm’s pasture system is also an evolving process. When they began the transition, the Cooks had to remove existing fence posts on the property in order to set up an efficient 210 acre rotational grazing paddock system. To keep the cows out of a creek that runs through the pasture, Tom built a bridge out of a 40 foot flatbed semi trailer. The latest pasture improvement is what Tom calls a “glorified lawn sprinkler,” consisting of a traveling irrigation system that can pull 100 gallons of water per minute from the farm’s pond when the pastures need water.

Pasture areas are separated into paddocks with hi-tensile electrified fence, polywire and temporary fence posts. Milk cows are rotated to a new paddock after every milking by moving the polywire and temporary fence posts. Tom has found he can rotationally graze the cows on an area twice, then likes to clip the area before the cows graze it a third time. This, says Tom, allows for good even growth of the grasses.

“Managing our cattle on grass is a never ending learning experience – it is like nothing I studied in college,” says Tom, who holds a bachelor’s degree from Michigan State University. “Grazing has a difficult learning curve because every farm is unique – it’s a lot more difficult than you’d think.”

To get the latest information on new seed strains and add to the farm’s income, Tom began selling seed a couple years ago. He primarily sells grass seed but also sells alfalfa, sorghum, turnips, corn and soybeans.

Depending on the time of the year, paddocks are

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## A closer Look



### Cook Dairy Farm

**Tom and Dianne Cook with their children:  
Cameron, 8, Miriam, 6, and Michael, 3**

**Location:** Pewamo, Michigan

**MMPA Members of:** MMPA District 6 and the Mid-Michigan Local

**Herd Size:** 200 milking and dry

**Replacements:** 160

**Acreage Farmed:** 538

**Milking set-up:** double-8 herringbone parlor

**Agriculture and dairy involvement:** Tom is a dairy representative of the Michigan Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative. The couple is active in the Clinton County Farm Bureau: Tom as a board member and Dianne as a Project RED and Ag in the Classroom teacher.

**The thing that makes a difference on our farm is:** Seasonal grazing. It just makes cow health and overall management easier.

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rotationally grazed every 20-40 days – 20 days during the spring, when grasses are thriving, then in longer intervals as the season progresses. The Cooks graze the cows from April 15 through the end of October, extending the grazing season by planting turnips and Italian ryegrass in wheat stubble.

When the grazing season ends, dry cows and pregnant heifers are turned out on the pastures with wheat stubble and turnips. When the forages are depleted, the cows are fed corn silage and round bales in the field. Tom estimates he saves \$1,000-\$2,000 each year by feeding the cows this way.

“Instead of hauling their manure, I haul their feed,” Tom says.

During the winter months, young calves are kept in a barn and milk cows are housed in freestalls. Having the pregnant heifers and dry cows on pasture allowed the Cooks to expand the herd without having to build a new barn.

“We have expanded the herd by about 10 percent per year since we started,” Tom says, of the farm he purchased from his mother in 1999 after his father’s quick passing from cancer. “The goal was 200 cows and we have now exceeded the goal. Right now we are just waiting to see who’s pregnant before I sell some cows.”

The Cooks seasonally breed the cows to freshen in March and April. Originally, the Cooks had hoped they would not have to milk the cows in January and February, but with some cows catching late, they gener-

ally have about 50 cows to milk during that time frame. The switch to seasonal breeding goes hand in hand with grazing – the cows are dried off during the winter when grass is not available.

Seasonal breeding means there will be a lot of calves born in a short period of time, something the farm’s original set up using individual calf hutches could not handle well. The Cooks now utilize mob feeding practices for even the youngest calves. Dianne gives newborn calves four feedings on a bottle, and then puts them in to a pen with up to four other same aged calves where they feed from a nipple bar. By the time they are a week old, calves are grouped nine to a pen where they share a 10-nipple bar. As soon as they are old enough, they are placed on pasture and supplemented with grain.

Since switching to grazing, the herd’s rolling average has dropped by around 4,500 pounds of milk. Tom explains that even though milk production per cow is lower than before, the farm is actually more profitable now because it requires less labor and equipment hours since the cows harvest their own feed and spread their own manure for most of the year. An added benefit to the changeover is a healthier herd with less mastitis, which the Cooks attribute to less confinement and less stress on the cows.

“The cows are just not as stressed as much as they used to be,” Tom says. “They can handle a lot of things much better.”

Tom and Dianne have found their fellow graziers to be friendly and willing to share advice to help each other become more profitable. In fact, the Cooks are involved in a newly formed grazing group consisting of 14 dairy farms called “Grass Roots.” The group meets four times a year, each time on a different member’s farm. A morning pasture walk is followed by lunch and a question and suggestion session.

“We all have to submit financials through the Cornell Dairy Farm Business Survey, so we really get a good picture of the farm and how it is doing,” Tom explains. “Each farm is different, and you can always pick up new ideas with a program like this.”

When the Cooks think about where they were seven years ago when they purchased the farm, they have no regrets about switching to a grazing operation. Today, they can pause – something they have more time to do now – to look out their kitchen window at the green rolling hills dotted with healthy cows and know the decision was right for their farm. They also feel they have created a successful dairy operation that will be around if their children want to join them someday.

“We haven’t looked back since we switched to grazing,” Tom says. “It has made life a lot easier for both the cows and people.”

