

Grazing for Heifers: A Possibility?

What are the potential benefits of grazing heifers versus confinement feeding? Which constraints may make grazing impractical on a particular farm?

Potential Benefits of Grazing

Do you have a modern image of “grazing?” Not a weedy exercise lot. Rather, visualize a paddock of dense grass sod. Can you picture it being mowed down by a line of shoulder-to-shoulder, hungrily eating heifers? Keep this image in mind.

What are the potential benefits of this kind of grazing for heifers? Let’s assume that most of the fields used for profitable grazing could be included in the farm’s regular crop rotation.

That is, pasture grasses are raised on fertile fields that can be harvested as hay or haylage when necessary. These pastures are normally kept in grass sod for an indefinite period since apparently a good grass sod takes three to five years to develop.

It is important not to confuse continuous versus managed intensive grazing. In continuous grazing, the entire fields are available to all the heifers for the whole grazing season.

With managed intensive grazing, heifers are moved regularly to fresh pasture. Previously grazed paddocks are allowed to grow new forage.

Many farms considering grazing heifers also have dairy cattle in confinement housing and feeding facilities. These farms may wish to integrate managed intensive grazing with their on-going confinement feeding operations.

Lower Harvesting Costs

Benefits? The most obvious benefit of managed intensive grazing is the reduced cost of harvesting the forage crop. Cornell’s James Grace provides some facts that fill in the picture.

The well-managed grazing farms, he reports, harvested about 40 percent of their grass land mechanically once a season. This was done usually in late spring or early summer. In addition, their pastures averaged 1.3 clippings per season. Thus, these farms using managed intensive grazing did have some mechanical harvesting and pasture maintenance costs.

In contrast, consider when all hay forage acres are mowed and raked three times a season. The estimated cost mowing and raking of \$18.00 per acre adds up quickly. Also, hay baling (\$.57 per small bale) or haylage harvesting (\$40 per acre) add a lot to the overall mechanical-harvesting bill.

Lower Manure Disposal Costs

Do you have memories of days spent loading out and spreading manure from confinement feeding heifer facilities? That's the second cost reduced by heifer managed intensive grazing. Custom solid manure loading and spreading rates are currently averaging between \$80 and \$90 per hour.

As the heifers are moved from paddock to paddock for fresh grass the manure goes with them. No front-end loaders, tractors or manure spreaders are involved.

Lower Crop Costs

Grass sods, once established, endure from year to year. They do not require annual tillage. There are costs associated with sod maintenance such as fertilizing and reseeding.

These costs are much lower than field expenses of plowing (\$18 per acre), fitting (\$12.00 per acre) and planting (\$14.50 per acre). In contrast to corn and alfalfa, grass pastures also require fewer insecticides and herbicides.

Improvements, Too

Benefits much more difficult to quantify in dollars are improvements in animal health. These may include lower rates of respiratory illness and better

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condition of feet and legs. Soil nutrient management may improve as well. Decreases in rates of soil erosion have been observed also.

Constraints Making Grazing Impractical in Some Situations

Farms without adequate land near heifer facilities clearly will not institute this kind of extensive land use practice. Sometimes roads, suburban land development or irregular topographic features prevent the development of a practical grazing plan.

Some farm managers are opposed to grazing as a practice. Their commitment is essential. Wholehearted support from the entire farm management team is needed to make a successful transition.

Moving from year-around confinement feeding for heifers to grazing at least part of the year is a big change. Many persons now grazing heifers report labor requirements were actually higher in the first year of transition. Later, they fell below prior confinement feeding levels.

Your local county Soil and Water Conservation District and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service County Field offices may be able to assist you in finding resources with local application.

References that may help you evaluate the economics of grazing:

A look at the comparison of cost and labor of grazing vs feedlot raised dairy heifers; <http://www.extension.org/pages/11002/labor-efficient-pasture-management#.VVN1-I5VhHw>

The Northeast Pasture Consortium has consolidated many pasture-related resources at their website including both research and practical extension materials; <http://grazingguide.net/>

Also see the other two resources at this site, Grazing Heifers: Making it Work and Grazing Heifers: Managed Intensive Grazing Checklist.

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