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4 Questions to Ask This Winter

John Roberts, Executive Director

At the time of this writing, the days are shortening and cooling off, following a long stretch of surprisingly pleasant fall weather. Nonetheless, winter *is* coming, by which time you'll hopefully have all the crops harvested, all the manure spread, all the cover crops planted, and all the livestock returned to the barns.

You're all done, so what do you do with all that time now weighing on your hands? I know, I hear you, "WHAT time?!?" I'll be bold-maybe brave-to offer some questions to ask of yourself.

1. "What went well this year? And why?" Ideally, you have enough high quality home-grown feed for the winter that will enable you to produce milk, eggs, and meat at as low of a cost as possible. Now is the time to sit down with your nutritionist and figure out what is the most cost-effective production you can make. If you feed corn silage, hopefully you still have enough left over from last year to take you through to the beginning of 2022. That will allow this year's corn silage to mature in the bunk and make the energy in it more effective and available. On the other hand, if you've run short of last year's corn silage, then now would be the time to plan that this year's harvest lasts through to 2023. **(cont.)**

4 Questions to Ask (cont.)

2. “What did not go well? And why?” This is an equally important conversation to have with yourself. Quality of feed can vary from year to year, depending on the weather-temperature, precipitation, humidity, and more. Farmers who graze their livestock see the impact of different growing seasons reasonably quickly. What adjustments can you plan for next year? Try adjusting your grazing rotation intervals, changing the species mix in your pastures, adding a summer annual to ameliorate high temperatures, or raising the percent of legumes in the sward. This is not easy to do, but can be accomplished through careful planning now.

3. “Did I make full use of any assistance available to improve my operation?” First, there’s the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC) program, a federal risk management program which helps cover the difference between the price paid to farmers and the cost of feed. This year, the DMC program has helped a lot of farmers across the state.

There’s also the Best Management Practices (BMP) program through the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets. This program can provide you with technical and financial assistance to make improvements to your production area to maintain compliance with Vermont’s environmental rules. It covers things from manure storage, to grazing infrastructure, to stormwater diversion, and more. All it takes is a phone call and it doesn’t commit you to doing something. If you’re nervous about potentially asking a regulator onto your farm, you can call me to discuss anything you might be concerned about.

Other programs like Farm Agronomic Practices (FAP) and Capital Equipment Assistance Programs (CEAP) are due in the middle-to-end

of 2022, so you have time to figure out your needs and interests.

4. “Do I know key data points to help me make good decisions?” Knowing some of the basic figures in your business gives you a good foundation to decide which direction to take. For example, do you know within a 5% range how much it costs to make milk per cwt? Do you know how much per pound of hanging weight does it cost you to raise beef? Given all of the challenges on the horizon-regulatory changes, climate mitigation, price stability, and more-having an understanding of the important benchmarks for your business will help you make better, more timely decisions down the road.

(Oh, and before you ask...*Was I good at this?* Not really, but my years with the Agency of Agriculture convinced me of the importance of doing planning. It’s also something that I’m sure many of you do during the day riding in your tractor or truck. Remember that we are lucky to be supported by a great group of UVM Extension personnel to have these discussions with!)

I’m sure I have not included everything I could here, but it’s a start. I’d be interested to know what kinds of questions you’re asking yourself this time of year. Drop me an email at john@cvfc-vt.com or call 802-989-6712.





Marc Cesario, Cheryl Cesario, Paul Knox

Going Against the Grain: Grazing Dairy Heifers for Efficiency, Profitability, and Herd Health

"There's no doubt in my mind that heifers on pasture are healthier," says Paul Knox, owner of Knoxland Farm in Bradford, Vt.

If you didn't know Paul, you might assume that he is an organic farmer tending a small herd.

To the contrary: Paul is a conventional dairyman of a large farming operation (LFO) with a herd of 1,300 cows.

"There's a conception, perhaps a misconception, that organic [farming] is about grazing and conventional [farming] is not," remarks Kirsten Workman, UVM Extension Agronomist and board member of the Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition. "But any farmer will agree these are healthy heifers and the forage is high quality."

She says this while standing in a field belonging to custom grazers Marc and Cheryl Cesario, owners of Meeting Place Pastures in Cornwall.

The lush green landscape is dotted with Paul's holstein heifers, some with their heads down munching on grass, others snoozing in the sun on a bright October afternoon. Three calves born just that morning are nestled amongst the taller grasses.

Marc and Cheryl are first generation farmers and have been custom grazing beef cows and dairy heifers from other farms since 2011 on land parcels throughout Cornwall. They recently added their own flock of 400 ewes, who can often be found grazing at various solar panel sites in Addison County.

Marc and Cheryl got into the business of custom grazing after spending an intense two years direct marketing beef, pork, and chicken. Once they welcomed their daughter, they quickly realized that caring for a baby while selling at farmers' markets is a difficult juggling act, literally and figuratively. They needed to shift to a business model that would allow them to focus on a couple of things that they could do very well.

They were presented with the opportunity to acquire land in Cornwall. Because the area's hilly topography does not lend itself to dairy

Grazing Heifers (cont.)

expansion, custom grazing seemed like the best way to use this opportunity and not overextend themselves financially.

The Cesarios have spent the past decade honing the complex logistics of their operation and building their “street cred,” as Marc describes it. Theirs is a business built on relationships and trust. As first generation farmers, they have worked hard to establish their reputation in the agriculture community as knowledgeable and skilled custom grazers who are deeply invested in the success of their clients and their animals.

It was that knowledge and commitment that led Paul and his heifers to Meeting Place Pastures this past May. He has perennially pastured his heifers at various locations: on discontinued dairies whose owners love the sight of cows in their pastures and on parcels of his own farm where manure spreading is not allowed due to their proximity to waterways.

Having been inspired to start grazing his heifers following a trip to New Zealand, Paul’s impetus for grazing was twofold: financial health and cow health.

From a financial perspective, farmers are often faced with increasing revenues or decreasing their expenses. With grazing, Paul opted for the latter. Grazing means that he can decrease his feed and facility costs. He does not have to spread as much manure, plant and chop as much corn, or engage in the laborious process of storing it.

From a herd health perspective, Paul observes that grazed heifers are leaner with stronger frames and less edema. They are more physically fit for calving and have larger birth canals. They are less prone to necrotic

dermatitis, also known as udder rot. The calves themselves tend not to be oversized and are less prone to ketosis, a metabolic disorder.

Are there management challenges with grazing dairy heifers? Absolutely. “I’m learning as I go,” says Paul. “It’s exciting and fun, but can be frustrating.”

Common issues Paul has encountered include fly-induced mastitis; pink eye when weather conditions are dusty; foot rot and cellulitis when the ground is persistently wet; and skin sensitivity to the sun. He also must take care to ensure the heifers have plenty of shade, adequate salt intake, and clean water to drink. Paul has dealt with the occasional freak accident as well, like heifers getting stuck in a tree, being spooked by unusual loud noises, or encountering porcupines.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that heifers on pasture are healthier.”

PAUL KNOX, KNOXLAND FARMS



A holstein calf born this morning on pasture

Grazing Heifers (cont.)

Overall, Paul has observed that his heifers on pasture are not any more accident or disease prone than cows in a barn.

For their part, Marc and Cheryl have found that it takes some time for livestock new to the pasture to get accustomed to fencing. It can take up to five days for them to transition from the barn, while they learn not to hang out at the fence line and that grass is, in fact, delicious. Marc and Cheryl keep their pastures well vegetated so that livestock are not wandering around looking for food. Because cows can physiologically only take so many bites in one day, the Cesarios want to ensure that each bite is hefty and nutritious. Marc's mantra is, "Move the cattle to the feed, not the feed to the cattle."

Of course, that is sometimes easier said than done. Nutritionist Bill Kipp, President of Independent Dairy Consultants, works primarily with organic dairies and has observed a common challenge among his clients: needing to supplement grazing cows with grain in July and August. Those months feature high heat, high humidity, and long days.

"The cows just hit a wall," he says.

He has been working with his clients to figure out how to manage the heat. Some have been pulling the bulls from their herds in October and November to ensure the cows do not freshen in the late summer months. He has also noticed that farms at higher elevations tend not to experience these issues.

Still, Bill is a strong advocate for grazing. "You can't produce yourself out of financial trouble. With all of these benefits, why wouldn't a farmer want to do this?"



Bill Kipp

Media Notes

It's been exciting to see CVFC and our members featured in print, video, and even radio over the past several months. It means that more community members are hearing farmers' stories and consistently learning about our collective efforts to protect water quality, support soil health, and address climate change. Here are some of the highlights:

- Back in June, **Goodrich Farm** in Salisbury was recognized by the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy with a 2021 U.S. Dairy Sustainability Award for the launch of their biodegester which converts manure and food waste into gas for heating and cooking. **Watch:** <https://bit.ly/3ozcBx2>
- Just to the west of the Goodrich Farm, a team of University of Vermont researchers is collaborating with **Blue Spruce Farm** in Bridport on a major project to study the impact of soil health management strategies, including cover cropping, conservation tillage, and more. The findings of their research will have implications for protecting water quality and addressing climate change, both in Vermont and across the nation. **Listen:** <https://bit.ly/3lc03tq> (cont.)

Media Notes (cont.)

- When Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Senator Patrick Leahy visited Vermont in August for an agriculture roundtable, they heard from Dave Conant of **Conant's Riverside Farms** in Richmond. He said, "I have seen more positive changes in the last few years than I've seen in my lifetime." **Read:** <https://bit.ly/3le0hAe>
- WCAX paid a visit to Allandra Farm in Ferrisburgh where they spoke with farmer Allan Brisson and UVM Extension Agronomy Specialist Kirsten Workman about the positive environmental and economic benefits of this practice. **Watch:** <https://bit.ly/3izcttH>.
- "Farming, like most human activity, impacts the environment. During the last two decades — and particularly since 2016 — Vermont has taken progressive and calculated steps to reduce one such environmental impact: nutrient loss from farmland," says **our Executive Director, John Roberts**, in *VT Digger*. Reflecting on the recent visit by Secretary Vilsack and Senator Leahy, John considers all of the improvements farmers have made to the way they manage the land and their animals to improve water quality, protect soil health, and address climate change. **Read:** <https://bit.ly/390CYmy>
- John returned to the 92.1 WVTM studios to talk about what's happening on Vermont farms this fall with the Wake Up Crew with Bruce & Friends. They discussed corn chopping, harvesting feed, planting cover crops, preparing barns for winter, and handling all the pressures of the pandemic and economic constraints. **Listen:** <https://bit.ly/3mvBSpr>



Year-Round VAAFM Assistance Programs

By the time you receive this newsletter, all of the 2021 deadlines for water quality grants through the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets will have passed, and the next grant deadline will likely be March 1, 2022. But if you're champing at the bit to write a proposal, there are a number of programs that accept applications throughout the year:

- **Pasture and Surface Water Fencing (PSWF) Program** - Technical and financial assistance to Vermont farmers to improve water quality and on-farm livestock exclusion from surface waters statewide.
- **Grassed Waterway and Filter Strip (BWFS) Program** - Technical and financial assistance to Vermont farmers for in-field agronomic best practices to address critical source areas, erosion, and surface runoff.
- **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)** - Implementation costs of vegetated buffers (up to 90% cost-share) and rental payments for maintained buffers in long-term contracts.

Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3BerNDk>.



Ladies who lunch at Wilcon Farm

Featured Farmer: Ben Dykema

Wilcon Farm, North Ferrisburgh

Wilcon Farm has been a member of the Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition since the organization's founding in 2012. Ben Dykema has served on the Board of Directors since 2013.

"I believe in the future of agriculture...in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come to us from the struggles of former years." - The Future Farmers of America (FFA) Creed

It's 1967. Ben Dykema is four, and his family's leased farm in New Jersey suffers a fire. His parents, Cornelius and Wilma, bring their family to North Ferrisburgh, a community of fellow Dutch immigrants, to start over. They milk 50 cows.

It's 1973. Ben is ten, and his father gives him \$100 to buy a calf. By the time Ben graduates from high school in 1981, he has built a herd of 30 cows from that calf's lineage.

It's 1983. Ben marries Kris. Five children are on the horizon. A few years into their marriage, they form a partnership with Cornelius and Wilma. Seven years later, Ben and Kris purchase his parents' real estate, and eventually all of their cows and equipment. Ben is quick to add, "No gifts when you have four other siblings who are not on the farm!"

It's 1998. Fire rages again. "Everything burned. Gone," says Ben. "All the original buildings. Lost cows, equipment, garage, shops. Almost the house. Where do we go from here?"

When he, a co-owner of Wilcon Farm in North Ferrisburgh, was up for re-election to the Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition Board of Directors in January 2020, he remarked, "Forty years ago, I memorized the FFA Creed and always find it worth a read and as a reminder for everyone to keep up the good work. If it was only about me and the modern farm generation, we all would have probably done something different."

Wilcon farm, in its latest form, is still standing. Ben has just finished second cut, the **(cont.)**

Ben Dykema (cont.)

first time in his life that has been done by June 10.

"I believe that to live and work on a good farm, or to be engaged in other agricultural pursuits, is pleasant as well as challenging; for I know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life and hold an inborn fondness for those associations which, even in hours of discouragement, I can not deny." - The FFA Creed

Many of the farmer members featured in our stories work alongside their family, divvying up chores among parents, siblings, in-laws, and other relatives, according to skill, interest, and need.

Not Ben. Although he owns the farm with his wife, he is responsible for "everything and everything else," delegating what he can to 12 employees.

While he is a self-described "driven person," Ben acknowledges that the "drive is dwindling," and he's "trying to figure out how to keep the farm running and not be here."

"My motivation back in the day was, 'Hey, this is fun,'" he says. "Some days you beat your head against the wall farming, and there's no reward. But if you can help somebody else, it's rewarding."

The immense challenges of an agricultural life are second to Ben's pride in what he and Kris have built together. "Our efficiency has been great, and that's why we're still here," he explains. "And we do a good job with animals, so I've always had cows to sell as an added income."

He and Kris own a handful of homes

surrounding the farm where they welcome visitors on a weekly basis for vacation stays and farm tours.

"We try to educate them. It's a real working farm," he says as he gestures to the barns, calf hutches, and garages he has built almost entirely by his own hand in a style that favors function over form.

"If I had lots of time and lots of money, I'd do more. But it is what it is. Where do you spend your money in life and what's your priorities?"

"I believe in leadership from ourselves and respect from others. I believe in my own ability to work efficiently and think clearly, with such knowledge and skill as I can secure, and in the ability of progressive agriculturists to serve our own and the public interest in producing and marketing the product of our toil." - The FFA Creed

For Ben, one of his top spending priorities is protecting water quality and soil health. Wilcon Farm is situated on 1400 acres across three locations in North Ferrisburgh, New Haven, and Starksboro. In North Ferrisburgh and Starksboro, the farm is part of the Lewis Creek Watershed, while in New Haven it's Little Otter Creek. At the North Ferrisburgh site, the farm's manure pit is 100 feet from Lake Champlain's highest level.

There is a lot at stake. Over the past five to six years, Ben has implemented a number of agricultural practices to support his goal.

He plants no-till corn and cover crops, which, as the name suggests, means that he is able to plant without tilling the ground first. With no-till, farmers, like Ben, are able to keep more nutrients on their fields, reduce soil compaction, and sequester carbon in the soil.

Ben Dykema (cont.)

Ben has also implemented a dragline system from a satellite pit for manure injection, a process of applying fertilizer just below the surface that reduces nitrogen and phosphorus run-off. His goal is to “avoid putting manure tankers back on the field...to keep [soil] compaction down.”

But the practice he speaks most highly of is his tile drainage system, a conduit for collecting excess water in the soil. Although not all of his fields yet feature such a system, he installs a bit more every year. He credits tile drainage with helping to reduce and, in some cases eliminate, erosion, washouts, and mud.

“Three years ago, we had four inches of rain, and that field never ran a smidgen off,” Ben observes. “It’s gone with the tile.”

Changing how he farms in order to protect water quality and soil health is both altruistic and practical.

“I always have believed that farmers are the steward of the land, number one,” says Ben. “Who else is going to do it if we don’t do it?”

At the same time, whenever he is considering trying something new, he wonders, “Will it work? Will it work long-term? Will it be profitable? You can only spend money once, and I want to spend it the right way.”

As with all things in agriculture, challenges are abundant. For Ben, one of the biggest obstacles is navigating the ever-changing regulatory landscape. He wants to be proactive and cooperative, but he finds the best practices to be a moving target. It can be taxing, both in terms of time and money, to keep up.

Another challenge is public perception. With 26

homes surrounding 130 acres and numerous tourists to the area, Ben has a lot of curious eyes on his operation and they do not always understand what they are seeing. His tile drainage system, for example, was misunderstood by some to be pop-up sprinklers, or even a means of draining pure manure from his fields. Neither of those are true.

“I’ve got nothing to hide. I try to be neighborly,” says Ben. “I invite people to the farm to help educate them.”

And then there are the economic barriers.

“What plan do you have? Is it an exit strategy plan? Or is it a growth plan? I am on the exit strategy side,” he confesses. As Ben nears retirement with little to no prospect that his children or grandchildren will take up the farm’s reins, he closely considers every dollar he spends and the hundreds of thousands required to invest in state-of-the-art equipment.

“I believe that American agriculture can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task.” - The FFA Creed

Ben credits both the Farmer Coalition and UVM Extension for their support in helping him to be a good steward of the environment. He considers both organizations to be a “great asset,” and enjoys the Coalition’s opportunities to see what other farmers are doing and to learn from them.

If another farmer were to ask him for his advice on water quality and soil health practices, Ben’s altruism and practical nature reappear. **(cont.)**

Ben Dykema (cont.)

"The economics are a part of it. They work. Not overnight, but they work," he would say, adding, "Supporting water quality is our responsibility. We can't do things that used to be okay. You have to change. To change the right way, you have to ask questions, you have to talk to your neighbors and talk to your peers."

Although Ben's life as a farmer is approaching the exit ramp, his commitment to the future of agriculture is unwavering.

"I get excited to see younger blood join in, and their enthusiasm for carrying it forward."



Aerial view of Wilcon Farm

How to Go Broke Farming

This list, published in Farm and Dairy back in 1927—yes, 1927!—is still relevant today. We might be partial, but we especially endorse Tip #9.

1. Grow only one crop.
2. Keep no livestock.
3. Regard chickens and a garden as nuisances.
4. Take everything from the soil and return nothing.
5. Don't stop gullies or grow cover crops—let the top soil wash away, then you will have "bottom" land.
6. Don't plan your farm operations. It's hard work thinking—trust to luck.
7. Regard your woodland as you would a coal mine, cut every tree, sell the timber and wear the cleared land out cultivating corn.
8. Hold fast to the idea that the methods of farming employed by your grandfather are good enough for you.
9. Be independent—don't join with your neighbors in any form of cooperation.
10. Mortgage your farm for every dollar it will stand to buy things you would have cash to buy if you followed a good system of farming.

Join Our Monthly Board Meetings

Our Board of Directors meets the first Wednesday of each month at 9:30 a.m. via Zoom. All CVFC members are invited to attend; members of the public may join at 10:00. If you would like to attend these meetings, email Kirsten Workman, Board Secretary, at Kirsten.Workman@uvm.edu. She will send you the meeting link/phone number.