



Profiles of Successful Strategies for Small Farm Dairies

A project of the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

Project Coordinator: Steve Richards, Program Director NY FarmLink/
NY FarmNet, 607-255-9854

Extension Cooperator: Peggy Murray, Cornell Cooperative Extension of
Lewis County, 315-376-5270

Sullivan Dairy Farm, Lewis County – Milking 46 of 52 Weeks at Seasonal, Grazing Dairy

The Transition

Kevin and Amy Sullivan operate a 65-cow dairy in Lewis County where they both grew up on dairy farms.

After graduating high school, Kevin started farming with his father. In 1985, he rented his existing farm from his parents and starting milking 35 cows. He grew hay, corn silage and grain corn.

After a couple years of traditional dairying, the Sullivans took a suggestion from consultant Jim Martindale and converted to rotational grazing in 1987. Kevin switched his 170 acres to all grass and legumes, and the herd is grazed from May through October.

Starting in 1991, Kevin and Amy made a second, and bigger, transition. They began switching to seasonal dairying, which requires that all cows be dried off simultaneously from January through March.

At the time the Sullivans didn't know anyone who milked cows only about 46 out of 52 weeks a year. So Kevin researched seasonal dairying by reading articles on the topic, and he turned to Amy and other family members such as his father for guidance. It took until 1993 for the Sullivans' herd to be fully seasonal.

The Sullivans milk in a tiestall pipeline setup during the winter months when the cows are housed. During the grazing months, the couple milks in a flat-barn parlor that Kevin built in 1999 for approximately \$1,200. Using the flat-barn parlor cuts down on summer barn cleaning and milking time.

The couple also stopped harvesting all their own crops and hired Kevin's brother to custom harvest them. This cuts the family's machinery costs and gets their crops harvested faster.

Mechanics, Management & Resources

Grazing and seasonal dairying make sense for Kevin and Amy. They didn't want to live in their barn and wanted to make things easier for themselves and their herd. Seasonal dairying suits them since they enjoy snowmobiling and skiing and usually take a vacation during the wintertime.

So when Jim Martindale suggested grazing, the timing was good. To implement the transition, the Sullivans wrote down their 5- and 10-year goals for their banker. Kevin reviewed those goals five years after he wrote them and discovered that he and Amy had met those goals.

The transition went better than expected, though people initially thought they "were crazy." The couple eased into the changes, taking three years to become a seasonal herd.

The biggest hurdle was training the cows to the flat-barn parlor. The first year the Sullivans almost gave up, but now the cows remember from one year to the next. Kevin trains first-calf heifers to the parlor before they freshen so they are used to it after they calve. Pasture management also was challenging in the beginning.

The transition has been a lifestyle change for Kevin and Amy. But they firmly believe if their cows are happy, then they're happy. "Comfortable cows make happy people," Kevin says.

Kevin manages the livestock, cropping and pastures, while Amy cares for calves up to six months of age. Kevin does the farm's bookkeeping, and he and Amy make financial decisions together. The couple doesn't use any type of computer program for record keeping.

The Sullivans' dairy was profitable before the transition, and their reason to make the changes wasn't financial. But money and budgeting were their biggest concerns about the transition to seasonal dairy.

Their cash flow was tight the first year of seasonal dairying, but they never borrowed money to finance the changes. When they converted to a seasonal herd, Kevin's father, who holds the real estate mortgage, offered to let them skip a payment. Kevin and Amy have never taken him up on his offer.

The Sullivans don't make less money than before the transition, but it comes mostly in the summer. Budgeting is critical to their having money during the winter months when Kevin and Amy's herd is dried off and they don't receive any milk checks.

They find that during those months it's easy to spend a lot of money on entertainment and eating out. Their awareness of this hazard makes Kevin and Amy more careful about spending.

The Future

The Sullivans' dairy is more profitable after the transitions. The couple owns all the livestock, equipment, buildings and facilities.

They have no plans to expand since they are fully using their land and don't want to grow extra forages to feed their herd in the summer.

Kevin and Amy's long-term goals are to:

- Be debt free. They have two children and want to keep the option open for them to come into the business.
- Fine-tune practices.
- Improve milk quality.
- Convert from storing forages in upright silos to bunk silos.

The couple doesn't push for production. Still their cows average 70 to 75 pounds during May and June before the weather turns hot.

Transition Tips

Success depends on several things. Weather, of course, is critical to cropping and grazing. Kevin relies on long-term forecasting accessed through the Internet and by satellite to help him plan for the weather.

Kevin began putting oat seeds in his hayseed mixture, using oatlage as a backup in his pasture. And cows like it. Kevin doesn't spend a lot of money on exotic seed; orchard grass works well.

The couple has suggestions for others who are considering grazing and seasonal dairying:

- All aspects of the business transition are critical to success. All your eggs are in one basket so be careful.
- Make arrangements to board cows that don't get bred on time and, therefore, are not dried off with the rest of the herd. Kevin usually doesn't have a problem finding someone to take cows, he says. People are often looking to fill their barns, and Kevin gives them the milk income.
- It's important to get the cows bred back on time. The Sullivans cull cows that get bred late, and they cull hard for fertility. They raise approximately 20 heifer calves and sell between 12 and 15 dairy animals each year.
- As with any transition, go slowly, talk to other people and use all the resources available.

Initially Kevin found little information about grazing and, especially, seasonal dairying. But things have changed: More resources and programs on both management practices exist today. He faithfully reads and subscribes to *New Farm* and *Grass Farmer* magazines. And Kevin researches things on the Internet. Cooperative Extension has organized grazing groups and pasture walks. Talking to other farmers is always helpful.

Kevin and Amy measure their success by the quality of their family life and their checkbook. As long as they can pay their bills, they feel they are successful.

Good management is the key to the Sullivans' success. And Kevin and Amy are excellent managers.

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program provided funding for the collection of these Profiles of Successful Strategies for Small Farm Dairies. The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program is a farmer-driven research and education program specific to New York state's six northernmost counties: Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton and Essex. Thirty-three farmers serve on the Program board led by Co-Chairs Jon Greenwood of Canton (315-386-3231) and Joe Giroux of Plattsburgh (518) 563-7523. For more information, contact Jon, Joe or R. David Smith at 607-255-7286 or visit www.nnyagdev.org

###