



Profiles of Successful Strategies for Small Farm Dairies

A project of the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

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Thompson Dairy, St. Lawrence County — Farming to fit assets and interests

The Transition

Doug Thompson, Gouverneur, N.Y., may have taken a few years to get his feet on the ground but once he did, Doug made changes on his dairy to better suit his assets and interests. He stopped growing corn, switched to rapid rotational grazing and adopted a different hay harvest system

Doug Thompson owns and operates a dairy farm that has been in his family since 1828. During the more than 175 years of its history, the farm has seen many changes. Today, Doug milks about 60 cows with the help of just one full-time employee. Of the dairy's 700 acres, only 65 are tillable. Doug grazes about 70 acres, with about 45 of that set aside for rapid rotational grazing. The remainder is used to graze dry cows and heifers.

Mechanics, Management & Resources

While Doug worked on his Master's degree at Penn State in the 1980s, he learned about intensive rotational grazing and baleage feeding systems. But it wasn't until he had spent some 15 years trying to grow corn on his heavy clay soils with yields of 12 tons – or less – per acre that Doug decided to implement some of things he'd seen during his college days. Most of these changes had to do with the feeding system:

- Having seen polywire at Penn State, Doug knew he could use it to institute a rapid rotational grazing system. He has 1- to 1.5-acre paddocks, and cows spend only about 12 hours on a paddock. "It's amazing how grazing can bring back land that's not so great," he says.
- At Penn State, Doug also saw wet baleage. He thought the biggest challenge would be feeding the large bales. Once he adopted this harvest system, Doug made another change.

- He installed an in-barn baleage feeding system in his tiestall barn. “It takes less electricity than a silo unloader,” Doug says.
- He stopped growing corn silage and concentrated on wet baleage. Buying an in-line bale wrapper helps him to harvest hay at optimum quality. For confirmation that the change to baleage paid off, Doug only has to watch his cows. “They eat it better,” he says.
- Doug contracts with a grower to raise his heifers. The success of this decision is seen in heifers that are “better grown and calve a couple months earlier,” Doug says.

These changes that moved Doug’s dairy from a more conventional one to an intensive grazing farm have yielded business and personal dividends. He saw improved profits, smaller bills and a stronger checkbook balance. Besides monitoring his checkbook, Doug uses a computer record-keeping system to track his financial performance and for tax planning.

“After a while, things don’t have to show a lot of difference to know you’re improving,” Doug says.

Improved profitability ensures Doug can keep the farm in his family and put money away for retirement. In addition, the lower labor requirements of a grazing system have allowed Doug to increase income from the farm’s maple sugaring setup and his logging woodlands for saw logs.

The Future

Doug feels his farm’s profitability is good, but it can always be improved with good management. Doug and his father hang 500 to 600 buckets a year to meet their retail market. Sugaring will help pay the taxes, he says, when he decides not to milk cows any more.

Transition Tips

- Look at assets, such as land, and your skills. Then do what fits both of those. “It took me 15 years to realize corn wasn’t my best option,” Doug says. But his land resources were perfect for intensive grazing. “The grass-based system appeals to my strengths,” he says. “I’m not particularly a tractor person, so I’d just as soon get out, walk and look at fields.”
- A go-slow approach works in most cases. For instance, when Doug decided to convert to baleage, he hired a neighbor to put up bales for him. His cows loved it, so Doug invested in some equipment. He bought a used wrapper and “made the largest amount of good feed ever,” he says.

Then after three or four years of success with the system, Doug bought a round baler, new wrapper and a bale wagon that self-unloads. With this last piece of equipment, Doug has been able to speed up his harvest. “If you’re able to do 20 extra bales on the first day of the season, you’re ahead for the rest of the season,” he says.

- Know yourself and what you like. “If you don’t think what you’re planning to do fits with your likes, step back and assess the idea before going ahead,” Doug says.

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

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