WISCONSIN STATE FARMER

Tomandl families focus on art of grazing with an eye on economic, environmental, social benefits

Ray Mueller
Correspondent

MEDFORD

For the Joe Tomandl II and III families and their colleagues in Grass Point Farms (a new dairy marketing organization), not everything is attractive in the agricultural changes that are large scale, emphasize high production and depend on intensive management.

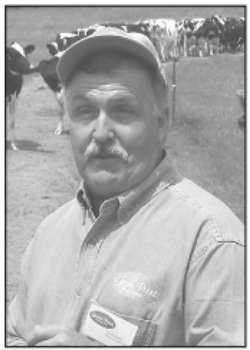
They think the emerging model of agriculture is not necessarily economically viable, that it is not beneficial to the environment, and that it contains drawbacks for family life and society in general. For that reason and others, they are emphasizing managed rotational grazing as the centerpiece in dairy farming on their central Wisconsin farms.

"Managed grazing is a logical and simple method of farming. It's blue sky and green grass on lots of acres," Joe Tomandl III remarked in greeting guests to his parents' (Joe II and Deb) farm for a series of presentations and a pasture walk that were sponsored by Grass Point Farms, which is in the early stages of distribution of cheese, fluid milk and butter as the first national brand name of certified humane pasture-based dairy products.

"We're doing things in their natural state. The cows harvest their own grass," Tomandl continued. "We're not mowing, hauling and storing feed or moving manure out to the fields. The cows do that for us."

Joe Tomandl III, a former vocational agriculture teacher at Mishicot High School, and his wife, Christy, returned

JOE TOMANDL III



JOE TOMANDL II

MIKE TOMANDL

to the home area to buy a farm – on which he has 140 cows – less than 2 miles from that of his parents, which has been in the family since 1918. In 1991, managed rotation grazing began on their fourth-generation home farm, where another son, Mike, is part of the operation in caring for the herd of 60 milking cows and youngstock that are raised on 120 acres.

"It's an art to have lush green grass all the time, but it's better for the animals, consumers, the environment and your lifestyle," Joe Tomandl III indicated. In late June, however, the Tomandls were facing a challenge on having enough new grass and forages available for grazing because of a shortage of rain throughout the month.

As the pasture walk proceeded, the Tomandls were trying to coax one or more of the scattered thunderstorms, which were ringing the farm on the north, east, south and west, to move over their paddocks. They pointed out to the visitors that the growth in recently grazed paddocks was not keeping pace with the volume of forage that would be needed for the herd after about mid-July without possibly having to start supplemental feeding from the 300 high-moisture silage bales that had been harvested earlier.

"You have to be able to see two to three weeks ahead. We don't want to run out of grass," Mike Tomandl advised the pasture walkers. "If it's growing too fast, we clip and harvest it. But we need some reserve."

The 100 acres of primary grazing land on the farm include some that has not been tilled or replanted for 20 years, Joe Tomandl II pointed out. The paddocks have an approximate 50/50 mix of dense stands of white clover mixed with some red clover and a variety of grasses. For the most part, the paddocks are clipped only to control weeds if they are not harvested mechanically for the winter's feed.

Every year, as 2006 is proving to be, is a learning year about grazing because it is much more of an art than a science, Joe Tomandl II stated. "We learn from the annual patterns and crop rotations."

At the perimeter of the series of paddocks, the Tomandls have what they refer to as "wild pasture." It lies along the woods and is reserved for their grazing group of dry cows and bred heifers. "We have to do that to keep the whole farm from becoming woods," Joe Tomandl II quipped.

With the help of 14 to 15 pounds of a protein mix fed per cow daily, the milking herd of about 50, which includes a few Jerseys, has peaked at an average of 74 pounds of milk per cow per day, and lactation totals for many cows are 18,000 to 20,000 pounds, Mike Tomandl said. "We're happy with that. Too much production can make cows ill. We have cows up to age 12, do mostly voluntary culling, and are raising heifers to build the herd numbers."

But what's important isn't limited to growing grasses, milk production and cow health, Joe Tomandl II emphasized. "It's not just economics. We have found a lot of allies. They are willing to pay a little more for products."

The presence of birds, such as bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, brown savannah sparrows, swallows, red-winged blackbirds, an occasional eagle and what Joe Tomandl II calls "little brown birds" around the paddocks is one of the obvious environmental benefits and a reason that some consumers will pay more for food originating from land that accommodates them, he said.

Referring to the permanent sod and full forage stands that have lasted for 20 years, Tomandl said, "We're building soil, not losing it. With the roots and heavy organic matter, the soil tilth and water-holding ability are improved."

Mike Tomandl mentioned the "tons per acre" of earthworms, beetles and micro-organisms whose presence is welcomed by the permanent sod and root structure, the fast pace at which worms break up manure patties and the value of the adjacent woods for cooling in the summer and protection from the cold in the winter.

The typical managed grazing infrastructure that the Tomandls maintain includes wide, permanent lanes that allow for easy travel, one mile of water lines, and perimeter and interior fencing. Mike Tomandl said some people consider the twice-daily moving of the interior wire to provide a new grazing break a chore, but he invites them to compare this form of labor with what's required in other management systems.

"It's great to hear the cows eat," Mike Tomandl remarked. Joe Tomandl II said grazing doesn't lend itself to "a cookie-cutter system," but added there is no doubt that it serves the goals advocated by county land and water conservation departments and the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service.

As in other parts of the state, crop rotations consisting of only corn and soybeans are taking root in central Wisconsin, Joe Tomandl II observed. He doesn't question the growing of corn for human food, has doubts about the appropriateness of raising it to make ethanol because of the long-term effect on soil conservation, and suggests looking for alternative plant materials for making ethanol.

While Joe Tomandl II and III agree on their basic philosophy, they don't do everything the same. For example, Joe Tomandl II relies on artificial insemination for breeding because of his safety concerns with bulls, while Joe III brings in seven bulls for his 140 cows in order to establish a spring calving window.

In addition to his advocacy for managed rotational grazing to dairy farmers in Wisconsin, Joe Tomandl II has traveled to Central America and Romania to promote similar practices. "The ability of one farmer to relate to another farmer is universal," he says.

"The common basis that we share is unique to farmers," Tomandl continues. "So other farmers quickly grasp the grazing techniques. The logic behind grazing is so basic and the benefits are so great for these farmers because it increases the yields of both milk and meat."