PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Rotational grazing: moving cows to pasture



Hope Family Farms
Aylmer, Ontario

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Description

Establish a rotational grazing system across 32 acres using permanent and temporary fencing.

Timeline

2024

Purpose

- Support a grass-fed dairy system by putting cows to pasture while improving overall herd health for both heifers and milking cows.

Outcomes

- Installed permanent and temporary fencing across 32 acres to support long-term grazing
- Reduced heat stress in the barn, supporting cattle health
- Enabled cows to meet a greater portion of their forage needs from pasture
- Supported participation in the grass-fed program offered by Dairy Farmers of Ontario

When first-generation farmers Rebecca and Zachary Verhoog arrived on their dairy farm in Aylmer over three years ago, getting their milking cows to pasture was one of their first goals.

Hope Family Farms has a herd of 50 Jersey cows in a free-stall barn, and from the beginning, they've worked toward a system that allows both their milking herd and heifers to spend more time grazing. Rebecca and Zachary met while working on a farm in New Zealand, where they gained experience grazing cows. This gave them the confidence to implement rotational grazing on their own farm.

"The main goal was to get our cows outside to become part of the grass-fed program [with the Dairy Farmers of Ontario]," says Rebecca. "Why would I want to continue bedding up this barn, raising it and doing all this extra work when these cows can quite happily just spend months outside and be content?"

Prior to shifting their livestock to grazing, Rebecca and Zachary grew corn silage and haylage for feed. But much of the land on their property was relatively heavy clay, which they found difficult to grow annual crops on. They felt that they could get the best return from their land by having a permanent pasture.

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PROJECT FUNDING AND IMPACT

The Verhoogs' rotational grazing project was completed with cost-share funding from the Ontario On-Farm Climate Action Fund (OFCAF), delivered by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA).

In 2024, they established 32 acres for rotational grazing, installing nearly 3,000 metres of permanent and temporary fencing. They follow the milking cows to observe grass levels and move the herd when that pasture needs to be rested. Cows come in and visit the milking robot in the afternoons to maximize grazing time while maintaining milking schedules.

With the grazing system now in place, they've continued to adjust and refine it to work best for their land and herd. Rebecca says the impacts have already been noticeable across the farm. Cows are spending more time outdoors, reducing heat stress in the summertime. By moving the herd and allowing pastures to rest, the heavy clay soil, which lends well to reseeding, remains covered with grass with deep root systems help reduce erosion.

"If you want to get your cows outside and do a rotational grazing system… the funding hugely helps with the cost of implementing your project."

"The best thing about OFCAF for anyone who is new to farming or has bought a farm is that it helps you 'better' that project. The cost-share funding can support in buying better materials that last longer, or maybe you can do a bit more pasture."

There were some unexpected benefits as well. Having grass-fed cows reduced the pest pressures on their farm because they no longer store feed grain or corn silage. Rebecca says that the population of native insects and birds has also increased: reduced spraying has attracted butterflies to the pastures while sparrows come to feed on flies and mosquitoes that follow the cows on the pastures.

"You are healthier and the animals are healthier by just getting outside more."

Access to OFCAF cost-share funding and support from OSCIA allowed the Verhoogs to move forward with a project as new farm owners, getting them closer to achieving their long-term goals.

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