

Growing dairy heifers on pasture a plus



Courtesy of UW-Madison

Dairy heifers graze on pasture as part of a University of Wisconsin project study.

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

Studies are showing that dairy heifers raised on pasture are healthier, cost less to raise and ultimately give more milk.

Jennifer Blazek, a University of Wisconsin Dane County dairy and livestock educator, began a project last year to encourage more dairies to raise their heifers on pasture.

“We have a lot of large farms that raise heifers in confinement,” she said.

Grazing heifers is a cultural adjustment for many dairy farmers.

“They have invested in facilities for heifers and feel they would be going backward to raise them on pasture, because that’s what small farms do,” she said. “The big dairies feel they can do it better and more efficiently in modern facilities.”

She first did a survey of every dairy in the watershed. The idea was to reduce phosphorus and runoff from the barnyards and confinement facilities. The survey sought to see who might be interested in cost-sharing to help cover taking some land out of crop production and putting it into pasture, and to assess perceptions about grazing heifers.

“In September we had a field day and pasture walk on



Courtesy of UW-Madison

Jennifer Blazek has been working on a project to encourage more dairies to raise their heifers on pasture.

a farm with a custom heifer grower. He has been custom-raising heifers on grass for many years,” she said. “It was a great opportunity for people to see how it works, and for other farmers to hear why the owner decided to do this.”

He addressed issues they were concerned about.

“Some thought the heifers would be more skittish and harder to handle when they come into the milk parlor for the first time,” she said.

The heifers were actually much calmer and friendlier. They also had much better muscle tone and calved easier, for their first calf, than heifers raised in confinement, she said.

“They had more exercise, were healthier and outperformed confinement heifers,” Blazek said.

The heifers were on pasture in the morning and afternoon, and at mid-day were brought into a shed and fed a little grain to encourage them

to come in for breeding and health checks.

“They were handled a lot and were not wild. When we did the pasture walk they all came over to check us out,” she said.

One of the farmers who decided to try pasturing heifers has a 250-cow dairy and is interested in heifer health.

“We want to follow up on these projects to find out how long these heifers last in the herd compared with their confinement-raised counterparts,” Blazek said.

Many dairymen are hesitant to try it, thinking they don’t have enough land and don’t want to take any crop land out of production.

“They don’t realize there is equal feed value in pasture, and less labor. Heifers feed themselves; you only have to move the temporary fence,” she said.

“I recently gave a presentation with Adam Able, an

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