

The Art of Good Grazing

Grazing Dairy Sheep

Vermont Shepherd Farm grazes several hundred dairy sheep and makes sheep milk cheeses. David Major and his family have been milking sheep, making cheese, and managing the flock on pasture for over 20 years now, and have learned a lot about how to improve pasture quality to keep both the land and livestock doing well.

Because small ruminants such as sheep are more susceptible to internal parasite problems than dairy and beef cattle, the grazing management strategy on this farm is designed to prevent parasite infection and problems. The flock is managed in three separate grazing groups to make managing the animals, parasites, and pastures easier.

There is one group of ewes that lamb in early spring. These ewes make up the main lactating group, and their weaned lambs are grazed in a separate area of the farm.



Figure 12.2. Good grazing management with sheep has steadily improved the pasture quality and productivity on Vermont Shepherd Farm.

A second group is made up of ewes bred to lamb later in the summer. These ewes are added to the lactating group later in the grazing season.

The farm's parasite prevention system has been very successful, so deworming does not have to be done routinely and the livestock are healthy. However, some groups may still require the use of a small amount of dewormer to remain in optimal health and avoid reinfection. This very limited use of dewormers has many benefits, including protection of soil life such as dung beetles, reduced cost, and consumer confidence that the farm is not overusing synthetic chemicals.

The lambs are the group most susceptible to internal parasites, so they are rotated into pasture that was previously hayed or otherwise not grazed by sheep in the current year. This allows the lambs to graze pastures that are mostly "clean" of infective parasite larvae. Lambs are moved frequently so they are not forced to graze the pasture down too short. This avoids exposure to infective parasites, most of which are found in the lowest 2 to 3 inches of pasture growth.

The ewes, which have better-developed immune systems than the lambs, are rotated through the pastures every three to five weeks during the grazing season. The strategy of using a taller pregrazing height, planning



Figure 12.3. At the farm, ewes are moved at least twice a day into fresh pasture. They eat the most digestible plant leaves, leaving behind trampled residual and manure; this protects and improves soil health.



Figure 12.4. Net fence is connected to the energizer power source using a single strand of highly conductive polywire. This allows areas of the farm where there is no permanent fence to be strip grazed using electric net fence. This fence can quickly be moved out of the way so the area can be hayed when it isn't being grazed.

for a short period of occupation, and not forcing the ewes to graze too short reduces the risk that they will pick up parasites.

Grazing is done using portable fencing and strip grazing. By using very few fixed or permanent fences, the farmers allow themselves a lot of flexibility to either cut hay or graze most areas of the farm. Strategically grazing or haying is one of the ways they create “clean” pastures with fewer infective parasites.

Fences are moved at least twice a day to give lambs and ewes fresh grass. Back fences behind each group are moved forward less frequently, but at least every three days to prevent regrazing of plants after they have started to regrow. Drinking water is provided using portable

tubs in each paddock, and there is piped water to all parts of the farm.

During the grazing season, ewes are fed a small amount of grain in the parlor. The grain is a high-energy mix to balance the high-protein pastures. The sheep and lambs are not fed any supplemental hay or other fiber during the grazing season. Instead, over the years the farmers have gradually increased the pregrazing height to allow a higher level of fiber in the pasture.

Plant species are cool-season perennial grasses and legumes, and the farmers have not reseeded recently. By using good grazing practices, the farmers have naturally developed high-density, highly diverse pastures that provide a large quantity of dairy-quality forage to the flock.



The Art and Science of GRAZING

How Grass Farmers Can Create Sustainable Systems
for Healthy Animals and Farm Ecosystems

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