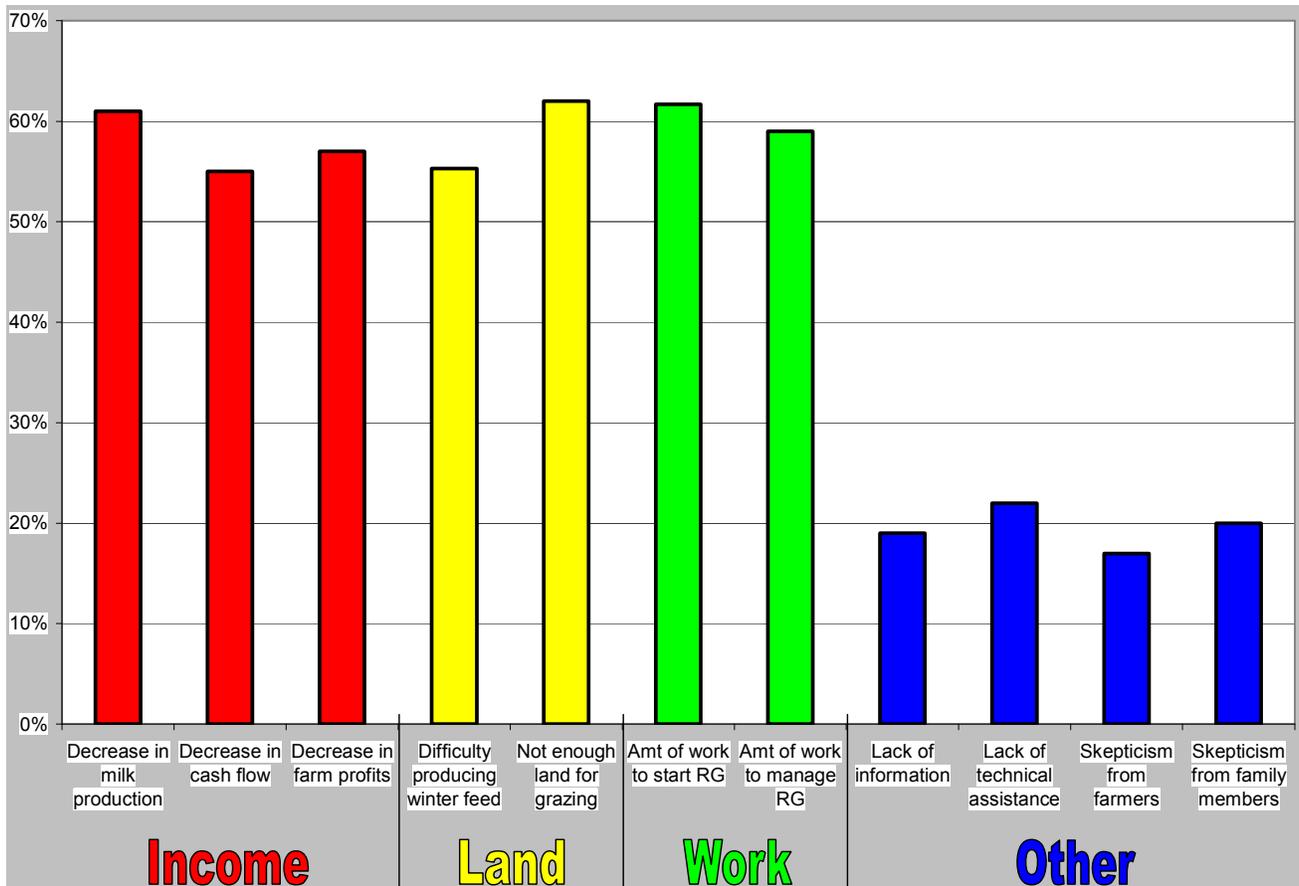


Initial Recommendations for Overcoming Barriers to the Adoption of Rotational Grazing

In early 2007, the Winrock International and the University of Vermont surveyed dairy farmers in four Northeastern states (VT, NY, PA, and MD) to gather information about dairy farming systems in the Northeast and barriers to adoption of rotational grazing. We received responses from over 1,000 dairy farmers, which helped us to understand the importance of some of the barriers that farmers face regarding the adoption of rotational grazing (Figure 1). From these responses, we have developed a set of initial recommendations for policy and program changes (on the following pages). To strengthen the recommendations and ensure that they would be helpful to interested farmers, we have interviewed farmers in the Northeast that have indicated an interest in adopting rotational grazing.

Figure 1. Percent of farmers indicating "moderate" or "significant" challenge to the adoption of rotational grazing



Below, we have provided some information on each of the barriers and a set of initial recommendations for addressing each. Currently, we seek input on the value of these recommendations and ideas to strengthen and/or add to them. When finalized, we hope to affect change by (1) pilot-testing some or all of the recommendations in selected areas and (2) by creating changes in state and federal policies and programs.

Income Barriers

Specific Barriers:

My herd will experience a decrease in milk production.

It is often, but not always the case that herds using rotational grazing produce less milk per cow than similar herds in confinement. This is due to energy expenditure by the cows and difficulty in balancing rations with grazing. However, if expenses fall more than income, farm profits will increase.

Reduced milk production per cow will lead to reduced cash flow for my farm.

Farms with high monthly payments, especially for debt servicing, may feel that reduced milk production will cause negative cash flow for the farm. However, if expenses fall more than income, profits will increase and cash flow will not be reduced.

My farm will decrease in profitability.

Almost all of the studies show that rotational grazing is/can be more profitable than traditional or confinement dairy systems.

Policy Recommendations:

Debt Restructuring or Debt Forgiveness

General Description: The government could provide compensation to lenders for increasing the term of debt for farmers adopting rotational grazing. This would lower the monthly principal and interest payments without burdening the farm or the bank. The lower monthly payments would help farmers willingness to explore the adoption of rotational grazing, where per cow milk production may be reduced relative to confinement feeding. In a similar fashion, debt buy-downs could also be explored.

Related Idea:

- Debt for carbon swaps – debt is reduced for farmers adopting rotational grazing in exchange for sequestering C in soils under permanent pastures and providing saleable C credits to the entity (federal or state government) that is buying down the debt level for the farm.

No-interest Loan Funds

General Description: The government would create a revolving loan fund that supplies no-interest loans to farmers adopting rotational grazing to help them through the transition period. As long as they are using rotational grazing, there is no interest charged. If they discontinue RG, interest charges are applied to the loan. A similar program has been provided for conventional farmers transitioning to organic farming.

Revenue Assurance

General Description: The USDA Risk Management Agency would create a program that guarantees farmers transitioning to rotational grazing a level of net farm income (NFI), based on current herd size, for the farm for a 3-year period. An accurate baseline for NFI would be calculated based on the most recent 5-year period. The baseline would be calculated from accounting and Schedule F tax records. Therefore, if the farm's NFI decreases, RMA would pay the difference to the farm during the first three years of the transition.

Note: Need a way to ensure that participating farmers have the incentive to cut costs.

Crop Insurance for Pasture

General Description: Federal risk management authorities would treat pasture forages and hay crops as important feedstuffs, equal in value to grains and other crops that are currently insured. Farmers using rotational grazing would be able to guard against weather-related losses in forage production. This would reduce the risks associated with pasture-based livestock production.

Green Payments

General Description: This could encompass several different programs related to the production of environmental benefits related to the use of rotational grazing. The specific environmental benefits targeted should be determined at the local and/or state levels. Global issues, such as C and climate change, would be included in all locations. Issues such as water quality and wildlife habitat would be identified and included by local or state committees. This program would pay farmers for meeting resource conservation goals and producing environmental benefits that are valued by society, such as conserving soil, reducing P loss, reducing net greenhouse gas emissions, and providing wildlife habitat. This program would be administered by NRCS in conjunction with local and state conservation districts.

Land Barriers

Specific Barriers:

I don't have enough land to use rotational grazing; and
I will not be able to make enough winter feed.

In most cases, a farm using rotational grazing does not require more land per cow than a farm cropping for year-round confinement-feeding. During the growing season, rotational grazing generally requires about 1 acre per cow. Remaining land can be devoted to making winter feed, which requires another 1 to 1.5 acres per cow, generally. Well-managed pasture can produce just as much protein and dry matter as row-crops and/or mechanically harvested forages.

Policy Recommendations:

Flexible Land Retirement Options

General Description: USDA would allow farmers using rotational grazing to graze on land that is currently enrolled in programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Land enrolled in CRP is generally highly erodible land (HEL) that requires a dense cover to prevent soil erosion and should not be tilled. Well managed rotational grazing would maintain a dense sward of vegetative cover and protect against soil erosion. Strict conditions for the use of CRP and WRP land would need to ensure that degradation was avoided.

Training Programs

General Description: USDA in conjunction with the Land Grant Universities (LGUs) would create organized and adequately funded training programs that teach interested farmers how to manage pastures for better productivity, extend the grazing season, and appropriate supplemental feeding. This is a recommendation for enhanced technical assistance on rotational grazing.

Grazier Mentoring

General Description: State Departments of Agriculture would create a program that pairs a beginning grazier with an experienced grazier to help understand how to manage pasture in a ways that reduce risk and provide feed options during adverse weather events. The experienced grazier would get financial compensation from the state for their work as a mentor.

Demonstration Programs

General Description: Farms that have established grazing systems should be made the focus of case studies and on farm research to provide real-life, real-time examples for beginning farmers. A set of demonstration farms within a state should be selected to highlight various approaches to rotational grazing. The farm locations should be distributed across appropriate areas of the state. Farms agreeing to be demonstration sites would be compensated for time and rewarded with special recognition.

Labor Barriers

Specific Barriers:

The conversion to rotational grazing requires more work than I can manage.

Due to typical workloads, it is very difficult for most dairy farmers to make enough time to plan out a conversion to rotational grazing.

The amount of work to manage rotational grazing is too much.

In general, a well-designed grazing operation requires less labor than a conventional dairy operation. In the survey, graziers report that one of the benefits of rotational grazing is that they have more free time. With proper technologies, such as high through-put milking parlors and good fencing systems, rotational grazing is can be as or more labor efficient than confinement or traditional systems.

Policy Recommendations:

Information and Technology Transfer Programs

General Description: USDA-NRCS should create a program that is focused on the implementation of state-of-the-art equipment and infrastructure for rotational grazing. In addition to modern fencing and watering systems, this program would include high-throughput milking parlors that can increase labor efficiency on the farm. NRCS state offices would work closely with their LGU to ensure that this program has adequate visibility and can service all farmers who request assistance. The program would provide both technical assistance on selection and design of farm infrastructure and cost-sharing. This program would ensure that conversion to dairy grazing goes smoothly and that the systems installed increase labor efficiency and overall farm productivity and profitability.

H1A Visas for Skilled Graziers

General Description: USDA should work with INS to streamline the process for allowing persons with demonstrated skills and experience with rotational grazing to work legally in the U.S. This program would be based on demand from U.S. farms for employing skilled graziers from countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, U.K., Argentina, and South Africa. The program would advertise in selected countries for opportunities to work on U.S. farms. Interested U.S. farmers

would be able to view the application packages of interested workers, communicate directly with them, and extend invitations for employment. USDA would provide funding to cover the travel costs to get selected workers to the employing farms.

Possible Additional Recommendations

Financial Analysis of Management Options Prior to Funding from USDA Programs

General Description: Enforce existing guidelines of programs (e.g. EQIP) for examining relevant alternatives in a comprehensive planning process prior to cost-sharing infrastructure development on farms that would require them to invest significant amounts of money or incur more debt.

Placement of Skilled Grazing Advisors in Local USDA Service Centers

General Description: USDA should ensure that at least one staff person in each local office or area is a skilled (certified?) grazing and farm advisor that can work effectively with area farmers to design, implement, and manage rotational grazing systems. This person(s) must have allocated time devoted to providing technical assistance to farmers on rotational grazing. Farmers that require or desire more intensive assistance can participate in the mentoring program (see above).

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