

## Mike's Paddock



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Several factors impact farming operations on a daily basis, from weather and market shifts to feed costs and equipment repairs. Farmers

have to be flexible, and dairy graziers are no different.

This spring, graziers in many parts of the country struggled to maintain their pastures because of abnormal rainfall. This has forced us to make some very necessary adjustments this summer.

### Challenging spring puts premium on planning

The weather was undeniably tricky this spring, especially in the southern United States. Near-daily recordable rainfall made grazing of valuable winter annual forage difficult. Lack of sun kept dry matter percentages low, and saturated soils made grazing difficult because of pugging and soiled forage.

In most cases, this resulted in a shortfall in grazed dry matter intake (DMI) that had to be made up with increased volumes of purchased feeds and stored forages.

Prudent dairy farmers who have found themselves using more purchased and stored feed than they budgeted for have already put pencil to paper and worked out a strategy to take care of any shortfalls.



Last season's strong harvest offers some consolation, as most producers carried over a healthy surplus of conserved forage that came in extremely handy this spring.

Producers who managed to get their warm season annual crops established at the right time are in good shape for the rest of the summer. I saw some outstanding crops of millet in Georgia that the cows were producing exceptionally well on thanks to careful monitoring of pre- and post-grazing levels.

Make sure to be on the lookout for grasshoppers and armyworm, as both pests love the tender warm season annuals and can consume a large quantity of forage in a very short time.

### Northern graziers able to stockpile forage

It appears the dairy graziers in the North fared much better than their southern counterparts. I visited four grazing dairies in Michigan last month, and all had an abundance of grass and great grazing conditions. Growth rates were getting very close to 100 pounds of dry matter per acre per day, and all had fields taken out of the rotation and locked up for silage.

This forage management is absolutely necessary to guarantee high milk production from pasture at the high total digestible nutrient (TDN) stage. It also means that after forage harvest, most of the pasture will be at the right stage for grazing.



## Mike's Paddock, cont.

### Continued pasture monitoring is key

As we move deep into summer, growth rates have slowed and we've experienced the usual drop in protein content. Even with slower growth rates, it's important to measure pasture dry matter levels regularly so the rotation can be adjusted to match supply with demand. I would suggest increasing post-grazing levels to 1600–1700 pounds of dry matter per acre, even when irrigating.

Summer heat also brings a reduction in grazed DMI. Trials have shown there is a measurable reduction in DMI at 78 degrees in climate controlled freestall barns. Imagine what the grazed reduction is when cows are subjected to temperatures consistently over 90 degrees.

There are ways to reduce the stress — and the resulting DMI reduction — caused by higher temperatures. Finding some method of cooling the cows is critical, whether you're using cooling pivots, mister lines beneath irrigation pivots, cooling ponds or building shade areas.

Because the cows are devoting more time to cooling activities and less to grazing, an increase in parlor feed or pTMR will

be required to keep cows lactating at a satisfactory level.

### Deciding when, or if, to cull cows

Graziers who seasonally calve in the fall and winter are well into breeding activities, but often ask me, "What do we do with the open cows?"

Two facts are certain right now. The cull cow price is high, and feed is relatively affordable. Currently pTMR is running in the range of 11–13 cents per pound of dry matter and parlor rations are around 13–15 cents per pound of dry matter. The all-milk price is forecast to stay in the \$16–17 range for the rest of 2015.

In order to make an informed decision on when to cull cows, it's important to do the math. Simply divide what you're spending on feed for an individual cow by the price you're getting for each pound of milk to find the breakeven point.

For example, if you're spending \$4 for feed and making 17 cents per pound of milk, the particular cow would break even on her feed bill at about 23 pounds per day. For this reason, it makes sense to milk the open cow until she hits 23 pounds and then cull her for the money she'll bring at the market.

## Health insurance open enrollment is on the horizon

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