

Pure.Sun Family Farm

by Dennis Cosgrove, University of Wisconsin

Farming has been in the Pearson family for over 100 years; however, today's farming brings about new challenges. Many changes have been made to the farm since its beginning, including external changes due to the farm being in St. Croix county, one of the fastest growing counties in Wisconsin, and only a ½ hour drive from St. Paul, MN. Other changes are internal and have been driven by economics, concerns for the environment, their family and the future of family farms.

Dan ran a purebred Holstein dairy until 1989. He grew corn and alfalfa, used conventional practices such as pesticides, inorganic (chemical or nitrogen based) fertilizers and most of the other inputs common to that type of farming. While the farm maintained a 22,000 lb herd average, Dan felt the margin was not what it could be. In addition, he was becoming increasingly opposed to the use of pesticides and their high cost.

In 1989, Dan switched to a rotational grazing system on his 160 acre farm. The farm was eventually fenced into paddocks 7-10 acres in size and old hay fields were grazed. Corn fields were seeded down to mixtures of orchardgrass, brome grass, red clover, ladino clover and fescue. Dan began grazing while still feeding a TMR mix, but soon switched to all summer forages from pastures.

In his current system, cows are moved from paddock to paddock based on forage height. Rotations may be as short as two weeks in the spring when grass is growing quickly, or as long as 35 days in the summer when growth slows. Heifers follow the milking herd to make the most of the forage growth. Cows calve on a semi-seasonal basis so most are in peak milk production when the grass is growing best.

Dan worries less now about his rolling herd average because he knows his profit margin and bottom line have increased. "Our feed costs are less, as are our energy costs, vet bills and fertilizer bills," Dan says. This is well borne out by data collected by the University of Wisconsin Center for Dairy Profitability. Its data shows that while herd averages are lower for grazing dairy farms compared to confinement dairies, both income per cow and income per cwt of milk sold are higher.



direct marketing of beef, pork, poultry and eggs. The farm is ideally suited for this being close to the Twin Cities, as well as the fast growing surrounding area. The Pearsons market around 8 hogs, 12 beef and 300 chickens each year. They enjoy marketing directly off the farm and have found that people are willing to go out of their way when they know the quality and origin of the food they are purchasing.



Terri and Dan Pearson

In 1995, the farm was certified organic which meant higher prices received for milk. Milk is marketed through Organic Valley Cooperative. Since beginning the rotational grazing system, the switch to organic farming involved few changes from what was already being done and the price advantages continue to be significant. While the lifestyle and prices were positive, organic practices also create some difficulties. Maintaining soil fertility is a challenge without the use of inorganic fertilizers. Higher prices for purchased feed can also be an issue.

While Dan did not grow corn for four years, he now grows 20-40 acres a year due to the high price of organic corn. Dry years, such as this one, also mean buying higher priced organic forages. Despite some of the challenges, organic farming practices fit the Pearson's philosophy and way of farming.

To spread the risk, Dan and Terri have diversified into

Pure.Sun Family Farm is also listed on the Farm Fresh Atlas of Wisconsin where all members have pledged their commitment to help create a sustainable, regional food system. This supports a way of farming that protects natural resources, minimizes use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and treats animals with care and respect.

Dan also is involved in land use issues aimed at maintaining Wisconsin's rural landscape. Dan serves on the Troy Town Board and has been involved in local land use issues. In 2003, Dan was the first to use Troy's Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program to insure the family farm will stay undeveloped in the future.

The Pure.Sun Family Farm has undergone many changes through the years and likely will continue to do so. Adapting to change will ensure a viable farm for what they hope will be another 100 years.