

Life satisfaction on grazing dairy farms in Wisconsin

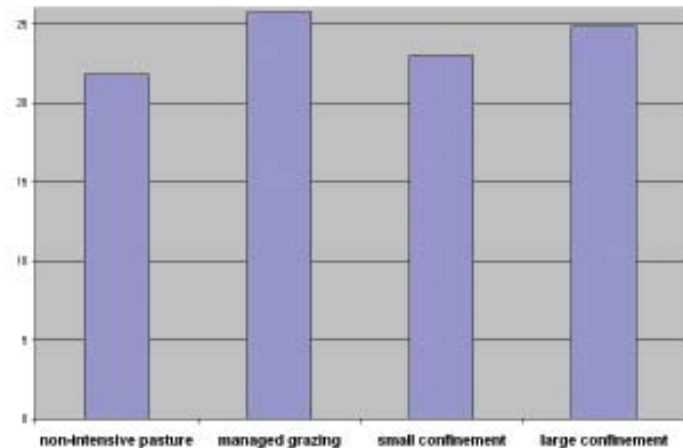


How satisfied are graziers with their lives? Their level of satisfaction is significantly higher than most dairy farmers, according to a recent survey, and statistically equal to that of the operators of large confinement farms.

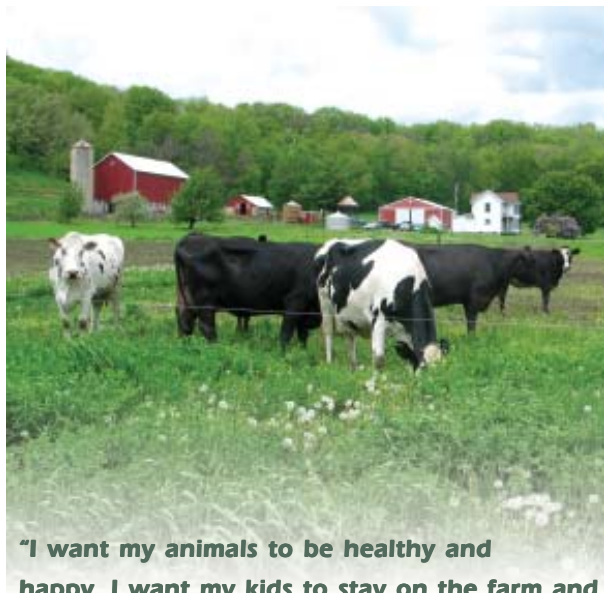
The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison researched quality of life on dairy farms in Wisconsin. Starting in 2005, researchers held a series of small group meetings with dairy farmers and in 2006 surveyed over 1,300 farmers.

When asked about quality of life, farmers using a managed grazing system and farmers operating large confinement farms had similar levels of satisfaction (Figure 1). Both of these groups of farmers expressed significantly higher satisfaction levels with general quality of life than farmers with small confinement operations that use primarily family labor and non-intensive pasture systems. In non-intensive pasture systems, farmers move cows to fresh pasture once a week or less often. Average herd size on small confinement dairies was 61 cows and on non-intensive pasture farms was 31 cows.

Figure 1. Overall satisfaction with life*



*scale is average sum of 5 questions each with a high score of 7; a high score indicates a higher level of satisfaction



"I want my animals to be healthy and happy. I want my kids to stay on the farm and make a comfortable living. I think grazing contributes to that." – dairy grazier

Managed grazing systems were defined in this study as farms which move cows more than once a week to fresh pasture. Those who practice managed grazing are called 'graziers.' They had an average herd size of around 60 cows. Large confinement farms were defined by their reliance on primarily stored feed and use of hired labor. They had an average herd size of just under 700 cows.

In the survey, graziers indicated significantly higher satisfaction levels with all quality of life measures than farmers who use pasture less intensively and operators of small confinement dairies. Dairy graziers and operators of large confinement dairies expressed the same high levels of satisfaction with family time, time with spouse, farming system, ability to be a steward of the land, ability to change their farming system and relationship with their animals.



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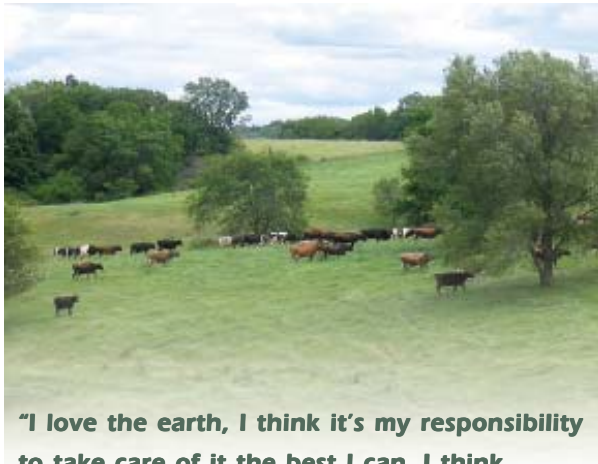
Graziers reported the highest level of satisfaction with herd health, even when compared to large confinement farms (Figure 2).

Graziers scored high when asked if they agreed with the following statements:

- In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

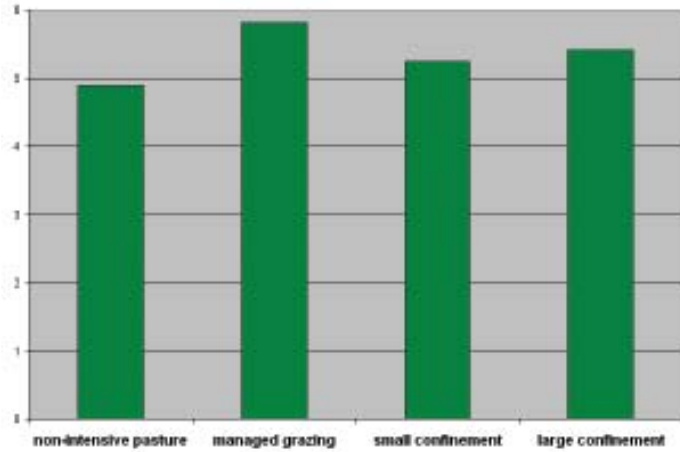
Graziers had a significantly higher level of agreement with these statements than farmers who use pasture less intensively and operators of small confinement dairies.

Dairy graziers, like all farmers in Wisconsin, are constantly challenged by market prices, weather, early morning and late night chores and animal care. However, there are many things specific to managed grazing that farmers and farm families enjoy.



"I love the earth, I think it's my responsibility to take care of it the best I can. I think grazing helps me do that." – dairy grazier

Figure 2. Satisfaction with dairy herd health**



**scale is average score on herd health question out of a high of 7; a high score indicates a higher level of satisfaction

Graziers were asked to list things that they liked about their system. Examples of their responses:

- "Watching cows spread manure instead of me!"
- "Cattle live longer, less investment in capital needs, land friendly, not as labor intensive"
- "'Independence day,' first day every spring the cows go to pasture"
- "Walking pastures with my husband"
- "Cows on grass after one inch of rain, not locked in stall barn"
- "Being outside, walking the pastures, using management rather than mechanical inputs to maximize returns to the farm"

Farmers from all the systems, including confinement and managed grazing, spoke openly about the hard work and long hours that go into farming. **Many graziers, however, commented that they were making better use of their time, and were experiencing less stress, since they switched to managed grazing. They listed factors such as:**

- "With the grazing system, the children are able to spend a lot more time out in the pasture with Daddy in comparison to when we grew corn, and a lot more time was spent on the tractor"
- "Time factor less critical, schedule is less intense"
- "Grazing has fewer critical deadlines"
- "Pleasant type of labor structure, work smarter"
- "Less field work in spring and fall means more family time and less stress and risk for myself"

This research on life satisfaction and dairy farming in Wisconsin shows that graziers and operators of large confinement farms are the most satisfied with their lives. However, the reasons for the two groups' high level of satisfaction differ. People considering starting a dairy farm using a specific dairy system or switching to a different system need to consider how the aspects of satisfaction expressed by farmers using that system fit with their own life goals and quality of life preferences. For more information on satisfaction among all dairy farm groups, see the upcoming full report on the survey at www.cias.wisc.edu.