



## The *New* American Farmer

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Gordon and Marion Jones

Chichester, New Hampshire

### Summary of Operation

- 60 acres of pasture, 70 acres of hay and 25 acres of corn on 340 acres
- 65 Holstein cows averaging 23,000-25,000 pounds of milk, plus young stock
- Management-intensive grazing, total mixed ration (TMR), bagged haylage and corn silage

### Problems Addressed

Excessive labor requirements. Gordon Jones had worked hard to improve forage quality for his dairy herd, but getting crop work done on schedule was a huge challenge because his labor-intensive operation kept him inside the barn doing chores until noon every day. The Jones' Dairy Herd Improvement Association rolling herd average hovered around 25,000 pounds, but they knew they could use their time and resources more efficiently.

Time with family. Even before their children were born, Gordon and Marion were determined that family would always be their first priority. Their dairy operation made it difficult to find time for their two young daughters.

### Background

After college, Gordon and Marion returned to Gordon's home farm to work with his parents, planning a gradual transition to work into the business and gain management experience. But a tragic farm equipment accident in June 1989 left Gordon's father a quadriplegic, and the young couple took over full management suddenly and under very difficult circumstances.

Adopting intensive rotational grazing in 1993 was a turning point. "The more I heard and read about intensive grazing, the more it made sense," Gordon says. "My dad shook his head when I started fencing a hay field, but when he saw how it worked, he was impressed. I was impressed, too."

"If we hadn't gone to grazing, we probably wouldn't still be farming," Gordon asserts. "It's the best thing we've ever done for our cows — and our family."

The Joneses combine careful financial management, and innovative forage crop and feeding strategies to achieve their goals for their family and the dairy. Grazing has enabled them to make the best use of their resources and facilities; make gains in herd health and forage quality; reap savings in feed, bedding, and labor costs; and have more time together as a family.

By hiring help, they have consistently reserved Sundays off, and get done early one or two evenings a week for 'family nights'— a real achievement for dairy farmers.

### Focal Point of Operation — Holistic planning and managed grazing

Gordon and Marion Jones prove that smaller dairies can be profitable and support quality family life. These winners of the 1999 state Green Pastures Award milk 65 cows in an older, 50-stanchion barn.

Without off-farm income, the husband and wife team manages the farm together and enjoys family life with their daughters. They have accomplished this by planning and focusing on their priorities, managing their finances carefully, and testing new ideas and adapting them to their operation.

“Grazing is a very inexpensive way to keep the cows out from late April to late October,” Marion says. “In 1998 they were outside until Thanksgiving because it was so dry.”

The Joneses improved their pastures through careful grazing management. Now, a former hay field retains a little alfalfa and timothy, but has evolved mostly to white clover, bluegrass and orchardgrass. They also reclaimed a rougher pasture without seeding. Instead, they time grazing to benefit the species they want to predominate, rotating their herd in and out of 1.5- to two-acre paddocks created with temporary fencing.

Cow health improved, and slow-moving, older cows with foot and leg problems were rejuvenated. Milk quality as measured by somatic cell count, an indicator of udder infection, improved. Feed, labor and bedding costs went down. The Joneses applied for and received USDA conservation program cost-sharing to upgrade pasture drainage and install fencing, water lines and permanent gravel lanes.

Since switching to pasture, the mostly Holstein herd has averaged from 23,000 to up to 25,000 pounds of milk. They achieve this level of performance by feeding a total mixed ration (TMR) they mix themselves to supplement the pasture during the grazing season. In winter, the cows are fed a TMR in the barn and outside in their exercise lot. The Joneses are proud to maintain this level of production without using the bovine growth hormone BST.



*The Joneses run their dairy herd through managed pastures and produce their own total mixed ration.*

To help get crop work done on time, they hire custom operators to do some manure application and harrowing in the spring, and share labor and equipment with a neighboring farmer. Along with grazing, these strategies have helped them boost forage quality. Their first-cut haylage in 1999 tested 18 to 21 percent protein, quite high for the Northeast.

The Joneses could not keep their promise to take time off without hiring some non-family help. They rely on local young people and summer interns from the University of New Hampshire. “We view hiring help like providing regular herd health checks,” Marion stresses. “We’re willing to pay for good help. When we don’t have help, it is not a great, positive family experience.”

#### **Economics and Profitability**

The Joneses belong to Agri-Mark, Inc., a New England-based dairy cooperative that

makes Cabot cheese. The Joneses succeed in meeting their goals and maintaining balance in their lives and their business by staying focused on their core values and priorities.

“Our financial goal has never been to get rich,” Gordon notes.

They strive to provide for their family’s material, spiritual and emotional needs, and operate the farm so that equipment, facilities and land are well kept, and equipment is replaced as needed. They have begun saving for retirement, and their daughters save most of the money they earn helping on the farm for college.

Careful financial management is essential to supporting the needs and long-term goals of a growing family with a small dairy farm. Marion handles the financial side of the business, using their home computer, and has taken classes to build her skills. She pays the bills, tracks and projects expenses,

income, and cash flows, and analyzes profit and loss margins. Marion estimates the bills that will be due a month ahead, and estimates the milk checks based on milk weights shipped. By the end of corn chopping, she is working on pre-tax planning.

“Marion’s very well organized, very sharp,” Gordon says. “She can quickly tell me exactly where we stand, and is a big help with the planning and decision-making. She has a good sense of when it’s a good idea to spend money, and when it isn’t. We often talk about business, and I rely on her judgment.” Working closely as a team, Marion and Gordon sit down at the start of every year and make a list of the things they want to accomplish if money is available.

Grazing saves thousands of dollars in grain, bedding and labor costs. The cows come in the barn only for milking during the grazing season. Well-managed pasture allows the Joneses to cut back from 23-percent protein grain to 15 to 16 percent through the grazing season, and cut grain volume from 28 to 20 pounds per cow. “That saves a lot on the grain bill,” Gordon notes.

They did not switch to grazing only for financial reasons, but they are happy with the results. “It has really paid off in 2000,” Gordon notes. Rainy weather delayed chopping and baling and reduced forage quality, but the grazing was excellent. Through July and August their cows averaged 80 pounds of milk a day on pasture.

### Environmental Benefits

The Joneses’ goal for grazing is to let the cows do more of the work — and to better manage the land. Having the cows do their own harvesting and manure-spreading means reduced fuel usage and air pollution, and less soil compaction, Gordon

says. They minimize negative impacts from grazing, such as erosion of travel lanes, by providing water in all paddocks, and improving travel lanes and drainage problems. Finally, they have reclaimed and improved about 30 acres of older, untillable pasture land.

“Because we’re out walking on the pasture every day, I think we’re more in tune with the land,” Marion notes. “We pay close attention to everything.”

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

The Joneses are quite content with the life they have built for their family. “The small dairy farm is alive in New Hampshire,” Gordon tells people.

Taking time for family life and away from farm work is essential to maintaining their positive attitudes. They attend church regularly, and enjoy visiting with family and friends. Gordon is a skilled woodworker, and the girls are picking up Marion’s love of basket-weaving. The Joneses enjoy cross-country skiing, or swimming at a nearby pond, and religiously take a family vacation every year. “Just get off the farm,” Gordon advises.

Their faith helps the Joneses stay focused on their priorities, and to stay positive. “I’ve learned to try to control the things I can control to the best of my ability,” Gordon explains. “The things I can’t do anything about — like the weather, drought — I don’t worry about.”

The Joneses host pasture walks sponsored by University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension to share their knowledge and inspiration with other farm families.

### Transition Advice

“Don’t think you have to know everything,”

Gordon advises. They like to discuss their ideas and plans with trusted consultants, including extension dairy specialist John Porter, their feed company nutritionist, and their herd veterinarian, as well as other farmers and ag professionals.

Try to keep everything in balance physically, mentally, and spiritually, Marion adds. That means “taking care of your family and taking care of yourselves so that you are not over stressed,” she says. Back-up plans for when things go wrong, and keeping debt within your comfort range help keep stress in check.

### The Future

Switching to grazing has boosted Gordon’s and Marion’s outlook on their future in dairying. “The last several years things have gone pretty well,” Gordon notes. “We don’t intend to get bigger. We don’t have the land base, and we don’t need to with just one family.”

After struggling through their early years taking over and buying the business, he feels a sense of progress in building on the foundation begun by his father, who died in 1997.

Gordon and Marion envision a new barn designed for cow comfort and labor efficiency to help keep the joy in dairying. They hope their progressive, but frugal management can support the new cow barn to improve health and quality of life for cows and people. But they worry about having to expand the herd beyond what their pastures can carry to pay for a barn. They will make these decisions based on family values and goals, and solid financial planning.

■ *Lorraine Merrill*

### For more information:

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