

# Black Hollow Dairy: Gone grazing, finding more free time

PD Staff Writer Ariel Waldeck

Published on 26 August 2011



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Blair and Kim Sanders, the owners of Black Hollow Dairy in Dublin, Virginia, made the switch to seasonal grazing a decade ago. Seasonal grazing has led them to find something that many dairy farmers do not have an abundance of – free time.

Kim did not hesitate to say it's the best part of their seasonal operation.

"Free time," Kim says. "It's a vacation where you are not milking cows 24/7, 365 days a year. You get that mental break."

The dairy's journey toward the transition to grazing began when Blair graduated from Virginia Tech in 1986 with a degree in agricultural and applied economics. He suggested things for his grandfather and uncle to do on the family farm to make a profit. They quickly realized that it was costing them too much to try and focus on production per cow.



Although Blair came back to the farm to help out, he also had another job selling semen. The job allowed him a way to oversee the family farm as well as get away whenever he needed to. Going from farm to farm, Blair only heard the “doom and gloom” stories about the dairy industry, until he came to Meadow Creek Dairy in Galax, Virginia.

“He was a grazier; it just made sense what he was doing,” Blair recalls.

For the next couple of years Blair and his family tried to continue milking as a conventional dairy. They were not making any money, but they were getting by. As time went on, the switch over to seasonal grazing seemed to Blair to be the best option for the Sanders' dairy to increase income.



Soon after switching over to a seasonal grazing dairy, the Sanders' dairy needed to provide their cows with more places to get water. With the help of a USDA cost-share program, a new water system was put in on the farm. This system could sustain 100 cows, replacement heifers and calves.

After it was installed, the cows walked a shorter distance to waterers, increasing their grazing time.

The cost-share program the Sanderses used is administered by the Soil Conservation Office, a federally funded program. Through it, owners and operators of agricultural land can apply for agricultural improvements to protect water quality. This program will typically pay up to 50 percent of the total money needed for qualifying projects, including labor and materials.

This water system alone and an inefficient parlor prevented the Sanderses from expanding beyond 100 cows. However, digging a new well made it easier to water cows during drought years. And after installing a new parlor, the dairy expanded again to 200 milking cows, replacement heifers and calves.

As their grazing operation has grown, the Sanderses learned what would work and what would not based upon previous years' experience.

"We tried all of the synchronization programs," Blair says, "and we have hired people to come in and breed them. The best thing that works for us to keep them seasonal is bulls."

Kim says that for their operation this system was best, but it may not work for everyone.

"Now we focus on buying high-quality bulls," Kim says. "We let them do the work. The way we farm is all about keeping it simple."

Upon switching to seasonal grazing, the couple started to cross their Holstein cows with Jersey and Brown Swiss bulls. For their operation, they said their ideal cross would be a half Jersey, quarter Holstein and quarter Brown Swiss cow. Holstein bulls have not been added to the breeding program for about 10 years.

“The first five or six years we were still trying to use Holsteins,” Kim says. “They are just not adaptable with grazing and breeding back. That’s the key; you have to be able to get these cows bred back.”

Calving 200 cows within 60 days is no small task. The couple says every year gets easier. They are able to find gateways in breeding, grazing and other aspects that help make things run smoother.

Several years ago, when milk prices were exceptionally low, the couple also thought about incorporating another aspect into their seasonal operation – becoming organic. The main thing that made them decide against it was feed costs.

“We didn’t have a source of organic feed within three hours of us that would commit to selling to us,” Kim says.

“If we bought organic hay it would have to be shipped from Pennsylvania or the Midwest,” Blair adds. “You may get \$30 milk, but you are paying twice as much for feed. Now the margin for organic and regular milk has come closer and closer together.”

When asked what they should have done differently, the Sanderses said they should have made the switch 20 years ago instead of only a decade ago.

“I am sure we have made some small mistakes along the way,” Kim says. “But you have to make mistakes to learn. We haven’t done anything major that we have regretted.”

One of the things Blair says is worrisome about grazing is the threat of drought and water availability.

“We don’t have an irrigation system,” Blair says. “Having one is something you think about in a drought. But if there is no drought there is little point for a system. If droughts continue, it is something that we will have to think about doing.”

Blair thought that in 10 years, he would like to see the farm expand. Kim pointed out that before they expanded any more, they wanted to make sure at least one of their two college-age children would come back and take over the farm.

They say that farmers who want to switch to seasonal grazing have to get out of the mindset of maintaining high production per cow.

On average, the couple switches to once-daily milking around Thanksgiving. By the week before Christmas, they dry off all of the cows, so that no one has to milk on Christmas. Exactly when the cows start to dry off heavily depends on the amount of grass still in the fields in the fall.

“Most of our pastures are perennial ryegrass, orchardgrass and clover mixes,” Blair states. “We like a lot of varieties. The cows also get about 12 pounds of a 10 percent protein feed daily when they are in the parlor.”

Another benefit that the Sanderses added to their operation was the parlor. Milking time was cut from four hours to an hour and a half when the Sanderses put in a swing-20 parlor.

“Once we moved into the swing-20 parlor it was like, ‘Why have you been beating yourself up for 20 years’?,” Blair says.

A larger abundance of free time was created for the couple, who have already found a dairy operation style that allows them to run the farm. They continue to refuse to let the farm run them. **PD**

## **PHOTOS**

Blair (far left) and Kim Sanders of Dublin, Virginia, are waiting to see if one of their two children, Matthew and Grace, will be interested in returning to the family farm after college before expanding their 200-cow grazing dairy herd for a third time. *Photo courtesy of Kim Sanders.*