

Southern FARMER®

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Low-input profit

By PAM GOLDEN

THEY don't sound like Southern dairymen.

And their farm doesn't smell like a dairy. Their operation certainly is an anomaly, at least in this corner of U.S. agriculture. Yet nobody who listens to Neil and Stanley Halsey speak doubts these two are agribusinessmen.

It's just their Michigan accent that throws off a listener at this Alabama grazing dairy. Yep, grazing dairy. That's why the spring breeze is fresh and their ledger doesn't stink.

"I wish I could get more people in grazing," Neil says. "They don't see much money in it because they don't see the milk."

The Halsey brothers started grazing on their third-generation dairy farm in Michigan, where they could only graze the herd five months a year. The more they used the system, however, the more convinced they were that grazing is one way to be profitable in the dairy business. Since their older brother lives in Pensacola, Fla., the two started looking for a farm for sale in the area where grazing could occur year-round.

"If people look at it, we have an unfair advantage, really," Neil says. "If you set it up low input — because you're going to get low output — you're set. ... We can make as much [profit] at about 40 pounds of milk as we were making at 82 pounds in Michigan."

Milk production is lower in the South because heat greatly impacts dairy cows. The brothers could bump their milk output by about 10 pounds if

Key Points

- Halsey brothers moved dairy from Michigan to Alabama.
- They made the move so they could operate a grazing dairy.
- At half the milk production, they make just as much profit.

they fed more grain and supplements, but that also would jump up costs. As it is, their cost of production runs about \$9 per cwt. "That's our total cost, not just feed," Neil says.

And the quality of life is better because the operation doesn't demand row crops, and they don't put up hay.

"It's a lot easier life," Stanley says. "We even have time for vacations."

The Halseys plant sorghum sudan for summer grazing, and oats and forage turnips for winter. They feed some supplement, mostly soy pellets, and stockpile coastal bermudagrass for the fall shoulder. Every pasture is no-till. They use a rotational grazing system.

The brothers grow their own replacement heifers, using bulls and artificial insemination. Generally, they like a 75% Jersey-25% Holstein cross, but they're adding a splash of New Zealand semen to improve their herd's performance on grass.

While they focus on maintaining herd performance, making a profit and being good environmental stewards, ultimately Neil says they have only one bottom line:

"We try to do an exceptional job with what we've got."

■ **Read more about grazing dairies on pages 6 and 7.**



CONVINCING OPERATION: Neil and Stanley Halsey started grazing cattle in Michigan and moved their dairy operation to south Alabama so they could graze nearly all year. "I like the grazing part of it. I have to — we had a successful dairy up there," Neil says. "We were just about out of debt."

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