

Life satisfaction on dairy farms in Wisconsin

Dairy farmers on managed grazing and large confinement farms express high levels of satisfaction



How do dairy farmers gain satisfaction from their lives? By meeting a new challenge? Purchasing a new tractor? Helping other people? For most dairy farmers, life satisfaction comes from all three of these types of activities.

In 2006, a team of UW-Madison researchers set out to understand life satisfaction on Wisconsin dairy farms. The team—rural sociologists Mike Bell, Sarah Lloyd and Steve Stevenson, and agricultural economist Tom Kriegl—conducted small group discussions followed by a survey of 1,300 Wisconsin dairy farmers. Participating farmers described what was important, enjoyable and satisfying in their farm, household, family and community lives. The team found some surprising differences—and similarities—between large and small confinement dairies and intensive and non-intensive grazing dairies. See the table on page 2 for farm categories.

Overall satisfaction

The survey asked questions about quality of life, life satisfaction in general, and satisfaction with specific aspects of farming including household tasks and responsibilities. Life satisfaction scores were consistently highest on large confinement and managed grazing farms. Life satisfaction scores on these types of farms were significantly higher than those reported by small confinement farms and those using a non-intensive pasture system. While the survey did not give a clear explanation of this difference, the small group discussions provided some insight into why these farmers are more satisfied with their lives. “Our discussions show that farmers on large confinement and managed grazing dairies are branching out from the way the generation before them farmed. They are working in different ways to overcome the cost-price squeeze threatening the viability of many dairy farms,” says Sarah Lloyd. “In addition, both of these groups receive support and encouragement from farm organizations that can be associated with their particular management style.”

Aspects of satisfaction

Although farmers on managed grazing farms (called ‘graziers’) and those on large confinement dairies had similarly high levels of life satisfaction, the survey showed that farmers using different dairy farm systems evaluated life satisfaction differently. The researchers used the terms *having*, *being* and *servicing* to describe the experiences that lead to life satisfaction (Figure 1). *Having*, which is associated with meeting production and income goals and gaining personal recognition, was less important to graziers and farmers using pasture non-intensively than confinement farmers. *Being*, which is associated with doing meaningful things and realizing one’s potential, was equally important for graziers and farmers on large confinement dairies. *Being* was less important for farmers using pastures less intensively and farmers on small confinement dairies. Nevertheless, the farmers of each dairy system gave more importance to *being* than they did to *having*.

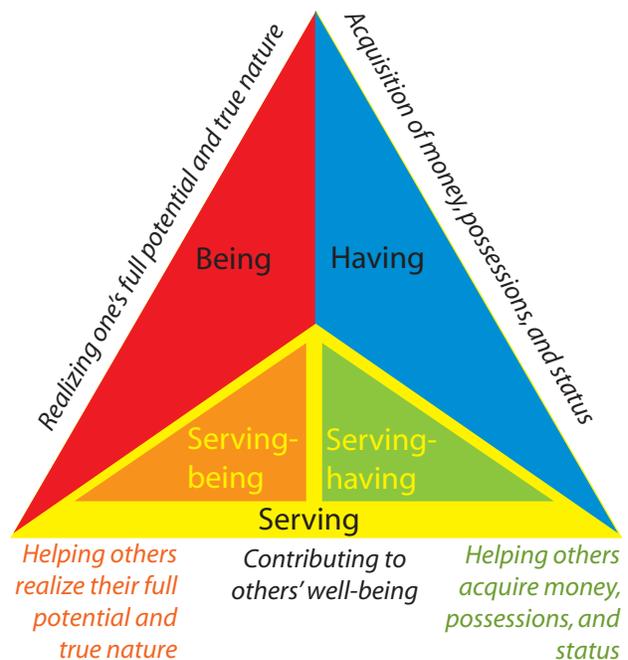


Figure 1. Being, having and serving are three aspects to overall quality of life.



Four categories of dairy farm systems in Wisconsin

Farm system (number of respondents to survey)	Labor in 2005	Feed and forage	Milking setup (percent using stanchion or tie-stall barn)	Average herd size of respondents
Non-intensive pasture (45)	Primarily family 0.08 employees on average	Move cows once a week or less frequently to fresh pasture Generally obtain little feed from pasture	93%	37
Managed grazing (100)	Primarily family 0.29 employees on average	Move cows more than once a week to fresh pasture Generally obtain up to 50% of forage from pasture during growing season	61%	61
Small confinement (268)	Primarily family 0.24 employees on average	Rely primarily on stored feed	88%	62
Large confinement (150)	Primarily hired 10.6 employees on average	Rely primarily on stored feed	5%	691

Serving, which is associated with contributing to others' well being, was also important for farmers in all dairy systems. Examples include producing food for hungry people and participating in community events. However, *servicing* was most important for the graziers and farmers on large confinement dairies. Interestingly, the researchers found that farmers on large confinement dairies who obtained satisfaction from *having* also found satisfaction in material aspects of *servicing*, such as creating jobs for the local economy. Both graziers and farmers on large confinement dairies, both of whom gained satisfaction from *being*, reported satisfaction from *servicing* activities that are associated with achieving one's potential or meeting a challenge, such as land stewardship.

Gender differences

Men and women on dairy farms used different criteria for evaluating life satisfaction. While they expressed similar levels of life satisfaction, women placed a higher emphasis on doing meaningful things and realizing their potential, or *being*.

Satisfaction not all about money

Differences in life satisfaction between dairy farms were not just a matter of money. The patterns in both the level of life satisfaction and the *having*, *being* and *servicing* experiences that led to life satisfaction did not correspond to differences in farm income or other aspects of farm finances. Family income, debt and assets for each of the dairy farm types did not correspond with life satisfaction levels. In addition, having an off-farm income and health insurance was not necessarily linked to higher life satisfaction.



Agricultural policy and research is often focused on maximizing production or on profits. Interest in ecological issues is also increasing. This research shows that social considerations that affect the day-to-day lives of dairy farm families need to be taken into account. "Without offering a satisfying life, even the most profitable and ecologically sound forms of agriculture will not be sustainable," concludes Bell.

This summary is an excerpt from a report titled "Milking more than profit: Life satisfaction on dairy farms," funded by a USDA-CSREES grant to CIAS and by the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board. Visit the CIAS website at www.cias.wisc.edu for the full report and more grazing research.