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GRAZING IS NOT A BLACK AND WHITE STORY

Societal issue

The percentage of grazing animals in the Netherlands has been slowly declining during the last two decades. Regional differences are observed, with the highest numbers for grazing on the peaty soils in the west. In the last decade, grazing of cattle has also become a societal issue. Society values grazing for reasons of cultural heritage and the association with animal welfare. The dairy sector wants to support grazing by influencing the factors that are affecting the extent of grazing on farms. Therefore, in 2012 the 'Convenant Weidegang' ('Treaty Grazing') was initiated. At the end of 2016, more than 70 parties in the Netherlands have signed this Treaty, including dairy farmers, dairy industry, feed industry, banks, accountants, semen industry, AMS industry, veterinarians, cheese sellers, retail, NGO's, nature conservation, government, education and science. The aim of the Treaty is to stabilize the percentage of farms that practise grazing. In 2016, almost 80% of the dairy farms in the Netherlands practised grazing.

Grazing in Europe

When you look at the perspective of grazing on a European level, grazing in the Netherlands is above average. Data on grazing in Europe are not easily available. But, based on educated guesses of the Working Group "Grazing" of the European Grassland Federation, Europe can be divided in different regions ⁽¹⁾, going from a percentage of grazing near 100% in the North and West of Europe to little grazing in the East and South. In many European countries, grazing is slowly decreasing.

Reasons for less grazing

The decline in the popularity of grazing is supported by current trends in livestock farming in Europe. Average herd size increased during the last number of years and the number of automatic milking systems increased. Grazing of large herds can be difficult to manage. And even though grazing in combination with an automatic milking system is very well possible, the general consensus is that it is also difficult to manage. The average milk production per cow increased and farmers with high yielding cattle like to control feed rations. Again, control of feed rations is more difficult in grazing situations. In countries where grass growth is delayed in summer, another reason for less grazing may be the uncertainty of grass supply to meet the feed demand of grazing cows.

Finally, reasons for less grazing may be better grassland utilization, the need to reduce mineral losses and arguments with respect to labour. The latter is particularly important for many farmers.

Grazing is not a black and white story

The trend of less grazing in Europe is expected to continue. Is this a matter of concern? This depends on your point of view. The grazing system affects various aspects like grassland productivity, animal welfare, environment, economy, labour and even society. Grazing has advantages and disadvantages (see Table 1). Grazing is certainly not a black and white story! The discussion on grazing should therefore not be focused on one or two aspects only, but on the full picture. The importance attached to the various effects of grazing is very personal.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of grazing⁽¹⁾.

+	Natural behaviour and some aspects of animal health
+	Some environmental aspects: less ammonia volatilisation, less CO2 and energy use, less methane emissions
+	Low costs
+	Grazing cows in the landscape contribute to the positive image of the dairy sector
-	Some aspects of animal health
-	Less grass yield and less balanced diet
-	Some environmental aspects: more nitrate leaching, denitrification, nitrous oxide emissions, N losses and P losses

The farmer decides

The extent of grazing obviously depends on a number of technical factors, like available land area for grazing and number of dairy cows present. Changes in those technical factors could lead to changes in the extent of grazing per cow. But technical factors are not the only influencing factors. Labour and economy are important factors as well for farmers in their decision to graze or not to graze. Finally, and maybe the most important, is the farmer himself or herself. Farmers play a key role in determining the

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extent of grazing of their dairy cattle since they decide on the day to day management of their farm. It is known that personal values, preferences, experiences and habits of farmers are very important in the decisions with respect to grazing⁽²⁾. Therefore, work on grazing should take the mind-set of the farmer into account. This has also implications for education on grazing. The current agricultural students will be the farmers, advisors and industry representatives of the future. Therefore, students need to learn about the different aspects of grazing, which is summarised in Figure 1:

- technical aspects are translated into the theme “more milk from grass”;
- economic aspects are translated into the theme “more money and less labour”;
- and social aspects are translated into the theme “mind-set of the farmer”.

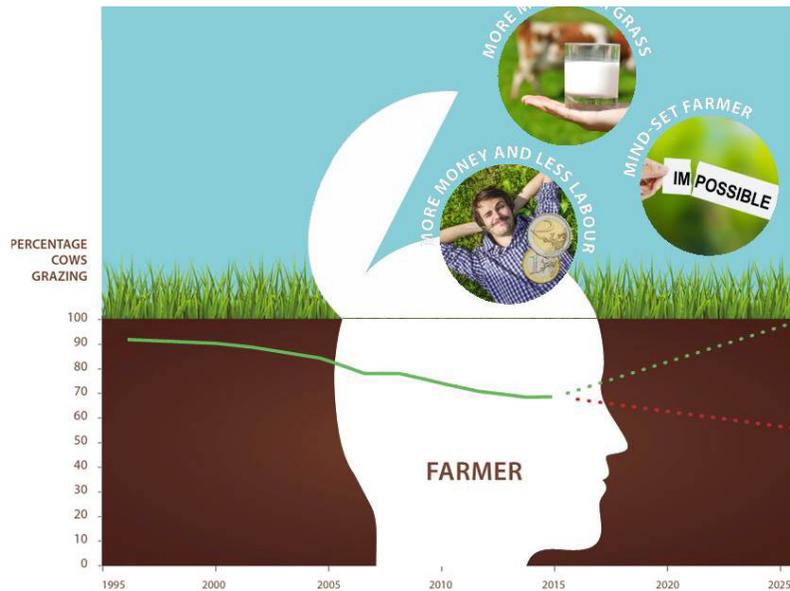


Figure 1. The decision of the farmer to graze or not to graze depends on technical factors, economic factors and social factors⁽¹⁾.

References

1. Van den Pol-van Dasselaar A. Kijken met een weide blik. Dronen: CAH Viltum, 2016; 48 pp.
2. Van den Pol-van Dasselaar A, Philipsen AP, de Haan MHA. The effect of social factors on the extent of grazing. Grassland Science in Europe 2016; 21: 62-64.