Northeast Pasture Consortium

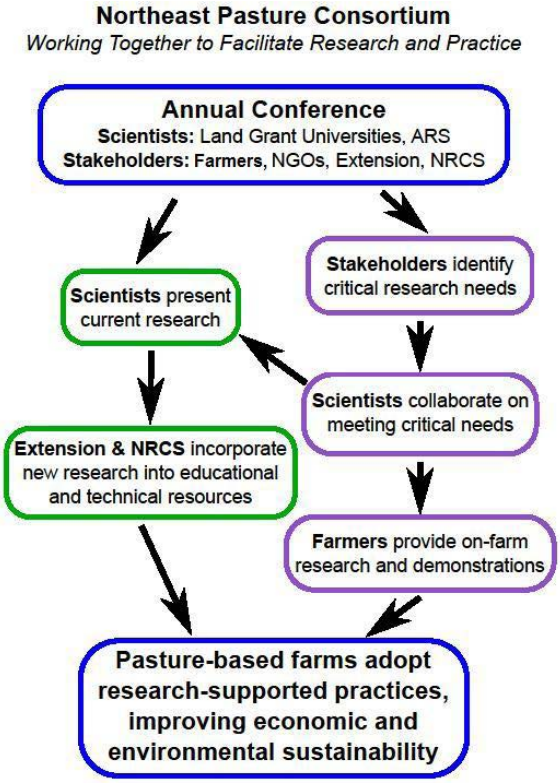
Northeastern farm business men and women manage 4.2 million head of cattle (36% dairy and 64% beef) and 500,000 head of sheep and goats. With the large population centers intermixed with these farms, the Northeast is a prime area to offer more locally produced foods.

Linking Researchers, Farmers, and Agencies to Support Northeast Family Farms

The Northeast (NE) Pasture Consortium region is linked together by similar livestock, crop, and climatic conditions. Across the 12 states of the Consortium, land is not well suited for conventional row crop production or large scale agriculture: soils are rocky, shallow, and sloping, and our fields are relatively small and irregularly shaped. Of the 181,952 farms in the NE region, 63% are small family operations. Still, NE farms are highly productive, and the region has ample grassland resources that offer unique and valuable advantages for direct sales to the consumer.

Research has shown that intensive pasture management offers a more reliable source of income compared to confinement feeding systems, particularly for smaller farms that are sensitive to market risk. Pasture-based livestock operations tend to have lower input costs, fewer environmental concerns, and fewer barriers to entry than large confinement systems. Pasture-based systems also offer opportunities for meat and dairy product differentiation (e.g. antibiotic-free, improved fatty acid composition; grass-fed) and can enhance the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of farms. As increased costs of grain and fuel make finishing livestock on grain in the Midwest less economical, farmers with adequate pasture resources can choose to retain their livestock and produce grass-finished meat, capitalizing on the lower production costs and consumer preferences. The more meat, dairy, and fiber that can be sold directly to the consumer, the better the chances are for profitability. Farmers can transition from feedlot systems to grazing systems and new farmers can begin grazing operations at much lower costs than retaining or obtaining a farm that requires sophisticated livestock housing, feeding systems, and heavy equipment. Reduced barriers to entry, less market risk, and decreased environmental concerns are essential attributes of pasture-based systems that foster future generations of farmers.

Since its inception in 1996, the NE Pasture Consortium has driven collaborative research among land grant universities, USDA-Agriculture Research Service (ARS), and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's). At the groundbreaking workshop in March 1998, over 110 livestock producers, scientists, educators, and agribusiness suppliers from 12 NE states came together and developed a paradigm that focuses on prioritizing short- and long-term research needs, finding properly trained researchers to work on practical solutions for these needs, and extending these solutions to farmers. Over the years, the group has offered many services to farmers around the world, including **On Pasture**, a web-based news information site where grazing management techniques and ideas are exchanged, and **a series of detailed handbooks** that are used by farmers as self-help guides covering the ins and outs of pasture management. University Extension professionals and conservation agencies like the USDA-NRCS have hosted **conferences** and **field days** and distributed **fact sheets**. As a result, farmers are incorporating research results and insights into pasture-based farming practices that protect both their financial bottom lines and the environment. The Consortium's work is becoming more valuable as shrinking federal and state budgets make it necessary to address unresolved issues in pasture-based agriculture with limited staff and resources. **By enabling efficient, synergistic relationships among researchers, farmers, and action agencies, the Consortium provides timely, science-based solutions in an unbiased manner.**



The Consortium's guiding principles are used at the group's annual conferences and in collaboration among researchers, educators, and service providers at land grant universities, ARS, state and federal agencies, NGO's, private consultants, and farmers throughout the year.

The Consortium has facilitated research that has had a far-reaching impact on the industry. Examples of recent and current research supported by the Consortium, include:

PROJECT	COLLABORATORS
Assisting Organic Dairy Producers to Meet the Demands of New and Emerging Milk Markets	• Univ. New Hampshire, • Univ. Vermont • Univ. Maine • Cornell • USDA-ARS (University Park, PA)
T*racking the Nutritional Value of Milk from Transitioning-to-Organic Dairy Herd*	• USDA-ARS (Wyndmoor, PA) • Rodale Institute
Forage-Based Approaches for Improved Profitability and Ecosystem Services of Dairy Farms	• Univ. New Hampshire • Penn State Univ. • USDA-ARS (University Park, PA)
Pasture-based Beef Systems project (Pasture-fed beef)	• USDA-ARS (Beaver, WV) • West Virginia University • Virginia Tech • Clemson University
Managing Forage and Grazing Lands for Multiple Ecosystem Services	• Univ. Vermont • Univ. New Hampshire • Penn State Univ. • Univ. Massachusetts • USDA-ARS (University Park, PA)

To learn more about the NE Pasture Consortium's research activities and impacts, visit ***http://www.grazingguide.net.***

The Consortium's past work has advanced pasture-based farming, but **there are critical questions in many different research areas that still need to be answered**, including:

Water Quality
- Are grazing systems contributing to the Chesapeake Bay sediment and nutrient loading?
- Are stream-side fences and ungrazed buffers the only effective tools for managing nutrients and sediment?

Forage quality
- How can digestive protein usage and animal health and production be improved?
- Which forage species have low neutral detergent fiber (NDF) or highly digestible NDF to enhance livestock efficiency in capturing plant nutrients?

Livestock
- How is climate change impacting aspects of livestock production, including parasite life cycles in small ruminants and heat stress in grazing dairy cows?
- What are the benefits of grazing systems versus confinement systems?

Land
- How can pasture quality on moderate to steep hillsides be improved with low inputs of capital?
- Which management strategies minimize the cost of transitioning from rowcrop and stored feed systems to productive, sustainable grazing lands?

Human
- Are cost-share programs properly directing resources to solve water and air quality issues?
- What are the human health benefits of pasture-raised livestock products?

Increased support of the NE Pasture Consortium stimulates research, education, and technical solutions for pasture-based farming systems--solutions that increase economic viability, environmental sustainability, and the availability of wholesome, locally grown food.