

# From Pastoral Landscapes to Modern Dairy Farms: Meanings and Practices of Grazing in Finland

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# Starting points



- ▶ Grazing cows depicted as an icon of the ideal pastoral landscape
- ▶ Questions:
  - ▶ How have the expansion and industrialisation of dairy farming affected grazing practices and what kinds of consequences these changes have for rural landscapes?
  - ▶ How do contemporary farmers perceive pasturing and the current place of the cow?
- ▶ Materials:
  - ▶ a selection of TV commercials by dairy company Valio, advertising dairy products from the 1960s to the early 2020s
  - ▶ online survey conducted among Finnish dairy producers (n = 142) and 14 thematic interviews with dairy farmers
- ▶ Part of the research project *The Changing Meanings of Milk Production and Consumption in Finland from the 1950s to the Present Day*
  - ▶ Academy Research Fellow Project, funded by the Research Council of Finland (2022–2027)



Eero Järnefelt: Lehmisavu (Cows in Turf Smoke), 1891

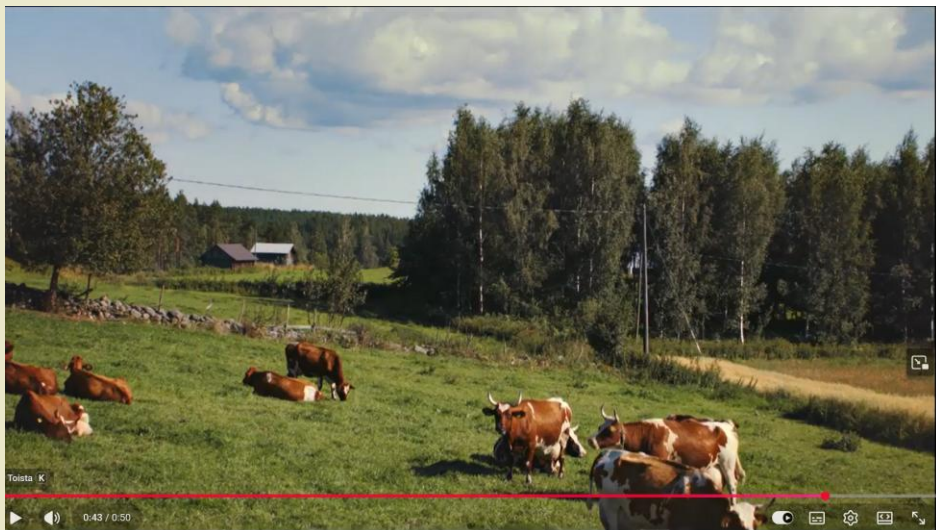


“Born from Finnish nature,” early 1980s



“Milk from the countryside,” 1982

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EseW86n6vmM>



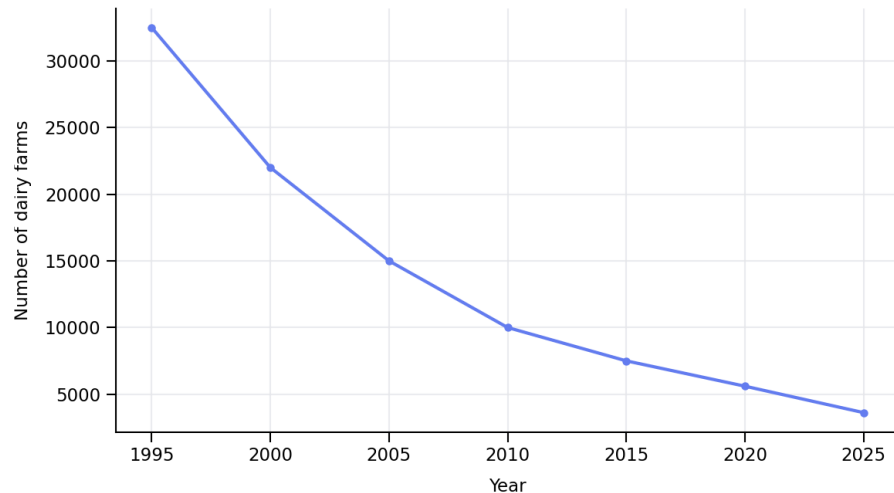
“Of the love for Finnish milk,” 2012



“We owners, Koskenoja farm,” 2016

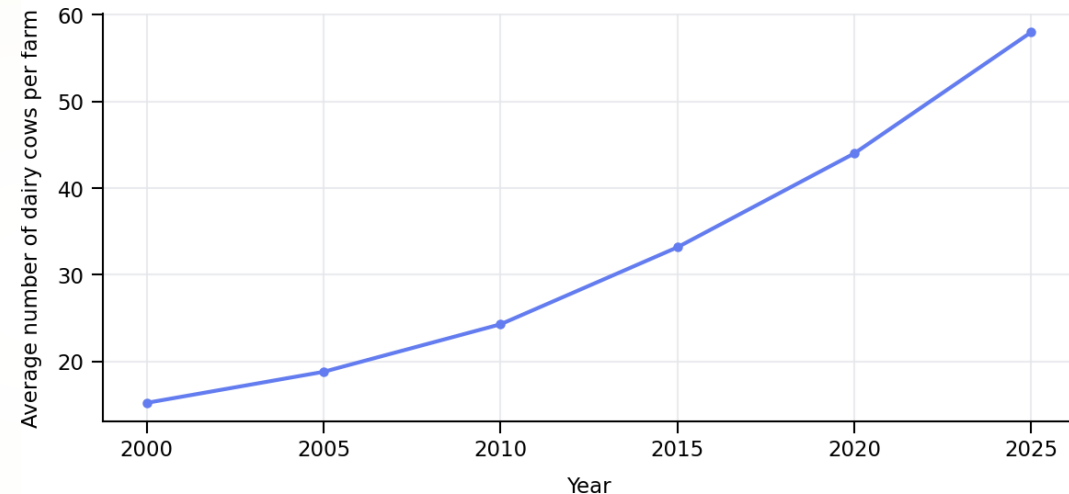
# Decreasing number of farms, growing farm sizes

Development of the Number of Dairy Farms in Finland (1995–2025)



Source: Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Milk and milk products statistics

Average Herd Size on Finnish Dairy Farms (2000–2025)



Source: Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), StatDB (PxWeb).  
Average herd size = number of dairy cows / number of dairy farms.

- Dairy cows and heifers living in tie-stall barns must have access to an outdoor exercise yard or pasture for 90 days per year (Animal Welfare Act 2024)
- Free-stall barns not subject to this requirement → cows housed in free-stall systems do not necessarily have access to outdoor areas at all
- In 2020, 72 % of all dairy farms pastured their cattle



# Contemporary farmers' views on grazing

- ▶ Recently, animal welfare issues in livestock production have gained increasing attention in public debate
  - ▶ Pasture access identified as one factor that positively contributes to cattle welfare
- ▶ Most of the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees had a free-stall barn → the views reported here concern voluntary grazing
- ▶ Generally positive attitudes toward pasture access
- ▶ Reasons for not grazing:
  - ▶ lack of suitable pasture or outdoor exercise areas
  - ▶ location of the barn or decisions made during the construction phase
  - ▶ Resources: establishing and maintaining fencing requires both labour and financial investment



# Drawbacks of pasturing

- ▶ Additional labour and costs
- ▶ The onset of the grazing season often causes a decline in milk production
- ▶ Risk of fence breakages
- ▶ Possible health problems
- ▶ Outdoor access not necessarily attractive even to cows housed in free-stall barns?

As for grazing in the summer, you could say it's mainly driven by certification requirements and cost considerations. We try to graze as little as possible, and none of us really feel that grazing necessarily makes the cows particularly happy in a modern barn like this. When the doors are open, there's usually maybe one individual cow that goes out to take a look, sort of to check things out, but especially on summer days, they clearly prefer to stay indoors.

(Woman 41–50 years, more than 300 milking cows)

# Grazing as a value-based practice

A lot of people justify not grazing by saying that the conditions in the barn are so incredibly good. And then, in a way, you kind of lose the sense of what is actually natural for a cow – that it's really an animal domesticated from one that spends the whole day walking around, back and forth, and eating. And then it comes down to what kind of values you have, or [...] that the animal should be allowed to behave in a species-appropriate way.

Of course, in modern free-stall barns cows are loose, they can move freely, go and eat when they want, go to be milked, be with their herd mates and all that. But still, for example, the floor is usually concrete rather than natural ground, because environmental regulations prohibit that. So there are a lot of things like that – grazing is still a different thing altogether. Especially the fact that cows get to choose and eat the forage themselves, what they want, or what is the most natural way for them to feed.

(Woman 41–50 years, 50–99 milking cows)

- ▶ enables forms of behaviour that are natural to cattle
- ▶ grazing as a form of “consumer-oriented work”



# Conclusion



- ▶ Intensification of animal farming changes the rural landscape
  - ▶ Fewer farms, bigger herds → not necessarily enough field for pasturing in appropriate places
- ▶ Grazing not self-evident for contemporary farmers with free-stall barns
  - ▶ Calculating the pros and cons
  - ▶ Pasturing as a welfare question among many others
- ▶ Taking into account the points of view of the consumers
  - ▶ perceptions of animal production largely shaped by the marketing and advertising of animal products
  - contradiction between the ideals and contemporary reality



Thank you!