



It takes a team at the Hoard Farm, too

by Hoard's Dairyman magazine and farm staffs

IT WAS a little over a year ago that some real soul-searching began in our operation. In short, the farm was not performing up to financial expectations. The milk price had been good for several months, but, as you can imagine, feed costs and other expenses also were up. It didn't help that we were forced to hold off on expansion plans because of unresolved manure storage issues.

At the time, our test-day milks were running around 56 pounds. Average test-day milk of the 56 Guernsey herds served by AgSource, our DHI, was 48. Guernsey herds in the top 20 percentile averaged 59.

We were at 67 management level milk which adjusts for factors such as age, fat test, and stage of lactation. AgSource average for Guernseys was 57, and the top herds were averaging 68.

We knew we could do better on milk production, but we also knew that we had to get ahead of some health and repro challenges first. We especially were plagued with retains and metritis, and our DA rate was running more than 10 percent. Given those conditions, we could expect breeding problems, and pregnancy rates ran well below 20 percent.

The first and most important thing we did was to form a management team and give it structure and focus. Nothing would have happened if we hadn't put together a group of advisors and farm staff who helped all

involved focus on things that needed to be changed and helped lay out a plan of how to make the changes and determine whether the changes were improving things.

As a catalyst for change, we brought in Jim Barmore, an experienced independent consultant now with GPS Consulting. We asked him to help us review our overall herd feeding and care, evaluate farm team structure, sharpen our business strategy, and serve as leader of our management team.

Other members of the team included Matt Kooiman, our Vita Plus (feed company) representative; Rod Martin, a Vita Plus nutritionist; Rick Halvorson, our veterinarian; Rod Wautlet, a financial consultant; the farm manager, Jason Yurs; and those from the magazine and company. Of course, cooperation of the farm employees was essential. Besides the farm manager, the full-time staff includes Joe Roberts, Branden Schleif, Stephanie Ayoub, and Noe Garcia.

Picked key goals

One early task of the team was to establish goals. Among the good advice we received was that farms make the most progress when they focus on a handful of key goals.

We set goals for SCC (less than 175,000), stillbirths (less than 8.5 percent), pregnancy rate (20 percent), and milk per cow. But you don't get

very far into goal setting before you realize that it, in itself, is not easy. You need to settle on what numbers you are going to use.

(Our milk-per-cow goal was set at a 60-pound average for all of 2009, but that was before we had decided to try 3x.)

For our SCC goal, we settled on DHI monthly summary. That includes every cow in condition to be tested. Bulk tank SCCs are important to watch from pickup to pickup, but the amount of tank-to-tank variation makes it difficult to use them for line-in-the-sand goals.

Our stillbirth rates come from our "305" calf table. But do you track the heifer rate or both bulls and heifers? We have a pretty good idea of cows and heifers that are carrying a heifer, and our bulls are worth just a few dollars. But considering both animal welfare in general and the welfare of the calving cow in particular, we wanted to use the rates for heifers and bulls combined for goal setting.

Also, what about twins? We added percentage of twin births to our goal summary sheet. This affects stillbirth rates, plus it was important for us to track when we later added retains and metritis to our list of top goals.

For preg rate, we use 21-day pregnancy risk. It is straightforward but not ideal for goal setting because you are always two months behind, and the bottom line reflects 12 months'

worth of breedings.

Our DeLaval All-Pro system provides a measure called 7-day milk for the entire herd and for each group. Entire herd 7-day milk is what we chose to use for our milk-per-cow goal. To us, that is a long enough period to smooth out a lot of the day-to-day fluctuation but short enough to help us identify trends.

Many, many changes have been made. Some were major, like switching to 3x and coming up with a new way to handle our close-ups. Other significant changes were putting in place stricter feeding protocols, trying several breeding strategies, improving silage bag storage conditions, reviewing amino acid supplementation, removing the feed bunk from the free stall barn, and adding a brisket positioner to our free stalls.

Even though we focus on 7-day milks, the table above shows our test-day milks and management-level milks for August 2008 when we began forming our team, for June 2009 before we switched to 3x, and for October 2009.

In future issues, we'll provide detail on some of the changes we've made and our take on how and whether

	Test-day milk	MLM*
August 2008	56	67
June 2009	61	71
November 2009	63	80

*Management-level milk

TEAM MEMBERS INCLUDE (from left) Matt Kooiman, Vita Plus; Jim Barmore, GPS Consulting; Rick Halvorson, D.V.M.; and Rod Wautlet, Agri-Business Consultants.

