



# EXCELLENCE IN REPRODUCTION

## The 2011 DCRC Reproduction Award Winners

Since 2009 the Dairy Cattle Reproduction Council (DCRC) has annually recognized dairy producers who excel in herd reproduction through the Reproduction Award program. New in 2011, the DCRC Reproduction Award program separated Holstein and non-Holstein herds into two categories to more effectively recognize the accomplishments of all dairies, keeping in mind breed fertility differences.

In a very competitive third year, the program received 74 nominations from dairies across 17 states. Nominees were analyzed by both a panel of industry judges and an independent analytic program to further evaluate raw data on every cow that calved between January 1, 2010, and December 31, 2010. After comparing the reproductive performance on the dairies, finalists were ranked based on various reproductive parameters and selected to receive a Platinum, Gold, Silver or Honorable Mention award.

In 2011, 19 dairies have been recognized for their herd's exceptional reproductive performance. The top four herds will receive platinum honors and will participate in a panel discussion at the 2011 DCRC Annual Meeting, November 10 – 11, in Kansas City, Missouri. Highlighting their on-farm reproductive success, the four Platinum Award winners provide insight into their herd reproduction program in this roundtable discussion.

### CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OUR WINNERS IN THE 2010 DCRC REPRODUCTION AWARD PROGRAM!

PLATINUM			
<b>Hourigan Family Dairy</b> Syracuse, New York	<b>River Ranch Dairy</b> Hanford, California	<b>Rock Bottom Dairy</b> Rock Rapids, Iowa	<b>Watts Brothers Dairy</b> Patterson, Washington
GOLD	SILVER		HONORABLE MENTION
<b>Breitenmoser Farms</b> Merrill, Wisconsin	<b>Beck Farms</b> Freeville, New York	<b>Hochkammer Dairy Farm</b> Manitowoc, Wisconsin	
<b>Collins Dairy</b> Greenleaf, Wisconsin	<b>Frazee Farms</b> Fabius, New York	<b>Pete DeHaan Dairy</b> Salem, Oregon	
<b>Crosswind Dairy</b> Elkton, South Dakota	<b>Michel Ranch and Dairy</b> Waterford, California		
<b>Curtin Dairy LP</b> Cassville, New York	<b>Schilling Farms, LLC</b> Darlington, Wisconsin		
<b>Majestic Meadows Dairy</b> Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin			
<b>Synergy Dairy, LLC</b> Wyoming, New York			



**HOURIGAN FAMILY DAIRY**, established in 1950, is located in Syracuse, New York. Mike Hourigan along with his sons Andy, Dave and Richard work collaboratively on the dairy alongside 20 employees. Hourigan Family Dairy is milking 1,150 Holstein cows with a rolling herd average of 29,850 pounds; they also farm 3,000 acres of cropland.



**RIVER RANCH DAIRY**, a 5,300-cow Holstein operation located in Hanford, California, is owned and operated by Jack de Jong. The herd is milked three times a day, with a rolling herd average of approximately 27,600 pounds. All replacement heifers are raised on-farm. River Ranch Dairy employs 60 people.



**ROCK BOTTOM DAIRY**, located in Rock Rapids, Iowa, is owned by Bernie Bakker and managed by brother Dan Bakker. Bernie purchased an existing 100 cow dairy in 2002, and has since grown the dairy to its current size of 1,100 Jersey cows. Currently, 100 acres of cropland are owned with the remainder of the forages purchased from neighbors. There are 13 employees working in various areas throughout the operation. Rock Bottom Dairy maintains a rolling herd average of 17,800 pounds, while milking twice each day. Heifers are raised on farm until 4 months old, then sent to a heifer grower.



**WATTS BROTHERS DAIRY**, started in the fall of 2006, is located in Patterson, Washington. Owned and operated by Watts Brothers Farms, the operation consists of approximately 20,000 acres of rotational crops and 2,750 Jersey cows. The operation's closed herd is fed rations formulated primarily with farm-grown feeds. Additionally, all young stock are raised on site. They have a rolling herd average of 20,410 pounds and employ 35 people.



## TELL US ABOUT YOUR REPRODUCTIVE PROGRAM.

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** We use a PreSynch program that we start at 50 days in milk (DIM), but 95 percent of the cows enrolled are bred based on standing heat before the end of the program. Thirty-five days following artificial insemination (A.I.) cows are checked for pregnancy using ultrasound. Following a pregnancy check, cows declared open are either treated with prostaglandin or started on an alternative reproduction program as recommended by the herd veterinarian. Our heifers are all raised on site and bred on observed heat starting at 11 months of age and 52 inches in height.

**River Ranch Dairy:** Our reproduction program starts with a voluntary waiting period of 50 days. For first service, we utilize a PreSynch program that begins 35 – 41 DIM, with weekly treatments. The second dose of prostaglandin is at approximately 49 – 55 DIM and 11 days later we start OvSynch® with a treatment of GnRH. We follow a 56-hour OvSynch protocol. Any cow that comes in heat after 50 DIM will be bred. 35 – 42 days after breeding cows are pregnancy checked. If called open, they are reenrolled into the 56-hour OvSynch program. Compliance with these protocols is key to achieving a good conception rate.

Our heifers are moved to a breeding pen at 13 months of age or 52 inches at the withers and given prostaglandin every two weeks. We utilize a tail chalk system, where chalk is applied to the tail head every morning to catch heifers in heat. Heifers are checked for pregnancy via rectal palpation.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** All of our cows are on a 65-day voluntary waiting period and average 72 DIM at breeding. Our first lactation cows are placed on a double OvSynch protocol; second and greater lactation cows are enrolled in a PreSynch program. An OvSynch protocol is used for any repeat breeders. Regardless of the program implemented, after 65 DIM cows are bred when they are observed in heat.

Our heifer breeding program starts at 11 months of age. Breeding takes place on observation of heat and sexed semen is used on the first service. Heifers checked open after the first service are enrolled in an OvSynch program or treated with a CIDR®. If a third service is needed the heifers are A.I. bred and placed with a bull after the cycle has been completed.

**Watts Brothers Dairy:** Our reproductive program seems to be unique in today's dairy atmosphere; we use no synchronization, timed A.I. breeding, and very few reproductive interventions. Instead, we maintain a voluntary waiting period of 50 days and tail head chalk to identify cows in heat. Cows are bred to mated sires for the first two services and a choice of young sire is used for the third and subsequent services. Any problem breeding animals are housed with a bull in a 'problem' pen. We begin breeding our heifers with a similar approach. Heifers are evaluated and grouped by size, then bred, typically around 13.5 months of age.



## WHAT IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS WITH YOUR REPRODUCTIVE PROGRAM?

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** The key to our herd's reproductive success is our focus on cow health and comfort. We build our rations with high-quality forages that allow for health and optimal rumen function. Another large factor is adequate heat detection and a sound A.I. practice—if we can accomplish those things, a high pregnancy rate will follow. All major decisions on our dairy are made by someone within the family, which ensures consistency in our practices.

**River Ranch Dairy:** We have two large keys to our success that complement each other well. The first key would be a good, sound transition program and the second, a strong commitment to cow care by everyone working with our herd.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** There are several areas in which we strive for the best performance possible. Consistency is a huge key to success for our herd's reproductive program. Cow comfort is very important to all the people on our dairy. We find compliance with our synchronization protocols is essential to help ensure our cows are becoming pregnant in a timely manner. Another key to success would be feeding a high-quality, high-fiber diet, also managing the transition area—keeping it clean and dry with a good diet in front of our close-up cows. We have an accomplished A.I. technician and all of our employees are very dedicated to cow comfort.

**Watts Brothers Dairy:** We feel the key to our success is keeping to the basics of dairy farming. We focus our attention on nutrition, herd health, cow comfort, maternity/transition programs, and managing employees. Our philosophy is that reproduction is ultimately a gauge of successful management in all areas of the dairy.

## WHAT ROLE DOES YOUR NUTRITION PROGRAM PLAY IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH?

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** High-quality forages are necessary for us to have a solid nutrition program. All of our rations are specific to each group—for high cows, fresh cows, first lactation cows and heifers—to ensure we meet their nutrient and energy needs. Delivering the right ration to the right group allows us to meet the reproductive health and milk production needs of the cows in our herd.

**River Ranch Dairy:** The nutrition program is very key to both reproduction success and milk production. It is our goal to provide a good, balanced diet that provides good energy levels and boosts dry matter intake. Regularly monitoring forage nutrient composition is key to adjusting nutrients according to forage quality and to targeting different groups of lactating cows and replacement heifers.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** Our nutrition program allows us to maintain a strong and healthy cow that performs well reproductively and enters the milking herd productively each time she freshens. Milk components, MUN, and body condition are watched closely to ensure our ration is helping our cows perform optimally. We work with a nutritionist who conducts a monthly analysis to see how our rations are influencing cow performance. Also, we try not to change our rations more than once or twice a year.



**Watts Brothers Dairy:** Feeding our herd involves maintaining a consistently high-quality ration formulated to individual stages of production. Milk components are something to which we pay very close attention. Feed efficiencies and cost minimization also play large roles in how we feed animals. Our situation, as part of a larger farming entity, allows us to do many unique things. We are in direct control of the majority of our feedstuffs, and are able to take advantage of many nontraditional feeds.

### TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU MANAGE THE TRANSITION PERIOD. HOW IMPORTANT ARE THESE COWS TO THE SUCCESS OF YOUR DAIRY OPERATION?

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** Our transition animals are separated into three groups: far-off, close-up and close-up heifers. Cows are held constant within each group to reduce socialization stress. Additionally, we feel that keeping heifers separate limits the competition and causes fewer problems following calving. All of our transition pens are kept at or below 90 percent stocking density, and at the first sign of calving we move cows into a freshening pen. These groups of cows play a big role in the success of the herd and we focus on this period as a time of great influence toward future success.

**River Ranch Dairy:** Our transition program starts when our cows are dried-off. We start our dry cows on a good, dry-forage diet at the beginning and then we transition them toward a high-quality and balanced ration as they move toward calving. We find it important that our team working with the transition cows is good at identifying cows at high risk for illness and that they are aware and capable of implementing the proper protocol when issues arise. Once our cows enter the fresh cow pen, they are observed every day by two people to identify potential issues.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** Our transition program is very important to the herd's reproductive success. We are as proactive as possible with managing the prefresh pen to ensure incidence of metabolic disorders is low, keeping things clean and dry. After calving we move the cows to the fresh pen where they are monitored closely and temped the first ten days. We have not changed our prefresh ration for more than 5 years and maintained a very low incidence of metabolic issues.

**Watts Brothers Dairy:** The transition period on our dairy is a key time for our herd and starts from the moment cows are dried-off and follows through 30 DIM. Our transition program is a typical standard program. We maintain a 60-day dry period and monitor body condition closely in these dry cows. Three groups of dry animals (far-off, close-up cows, close-up heifers) are fed rations appropriate to their stage. Cows calve in individual maternity pens, which are cleaned after each cow to provide a sanitary and comfortable environment. Fresh animals are maintained at a maximum of 90% crowding density. The identification and prevention of problems well in advance of any clinical signs is of paramount importance to our success and we have instilled that mindset in our employees.



## WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE RELATED TO REPRODUCTION?

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** One of the biggest challenges we face with our herd's reproduction is the ability to continually maintain and make improvements. Reaching success points with any area of our dairy is something we always strive for, but maintaining that success and working toward bigger and better improvements can be a real challenge.

**River Ranch Dairy:** The biggest challenge we are facing is maintaining successful reproduction levels and conditioning our cows to get the same results year after year. As our cows and our operation advance it can be a struggle to keep maintaining and improving our herd's reproduction statistics.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** Keeping a progressive mindset and trying to improve on current protocols while keeping it simple and attainable is one of our top challenges.

**Watts Brothers Dairy:** A challenge is maintaining a preventative mindset in our employees. In general, people naturally take a "fix-it" approach to problems. When an issue has manifested itself into a visible problem, the battle has been mostly lost. For success in all areas of management, and then consequent success in the reproduction of cows, it is critical to work in a preventative manner. Continual reinforcement of this attitude is important.

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHER PRODUCERS LOOKING TO IMPROVE HERD REPRODUCTION?

**Hourigan Family Dairy:** Every farm is different; you need to do what works best for your operation and the reproductive success of your herd. Something we focus a lot of time on is heat detection and compliance with our breeding programs. Identify problem areas and focus attention toward improvements.

**River Ranch Dairy:** Pay attention to the transition period—reproduction is more than just pregnancy rate. Reproductive success is a reflection of how well a cow was transitioned back to the milking herd. Focus a great deal of attention on the transition period and ensure your rations contain the optimal energy levels and that DMI is maintained throughout.

**Rock Bottom Dairy:** Find an implementable program that works well with your operation and stick with it. Also, formulate simple high-quality high-fiber rations that provide optimal cow performance. Hand-in-hand with these pieces, consistency is key with all aspects of the dairy.

**Watts Brothers Dairy:** Intensely manage the basic things; if the basics are not in order, the details are irrelevant. Maintain a big picture outlook and instill an attitude of success in your team. After that, the details become easy to manage, and success will follow.