

# Berks dairyman is conservationist, spokesman, innovative farmer

BY SHEILA MILLER

ROBESONIA — Nestled in the fertile farmland of Heidelberg Township, Berks County is a highly productive dairy farm belonging to Donald and Ann Duncan.

Conservationist, dairy spokesman, and modern farmer are terms that aptly describe Duncan, as well as his attractive, energetic wife.

Working side-by-side in their modern milking parlor, the Duncans share their philosophies on the dairy industry, politics, and their operation.

Since his father purchased the fertile farm back in 1944 and since Don took over the 150-acre farm in 1959, many of the latest ideas in dairying have been incorporated. At times, Duncan admits, he's served as a "guinea pig", investing in new equipment and concepts before other farmers in the area.

One example of his willingness to jump in and try something new came in the mid-1970's when he installed the first timber-sided manure stacking area to handle the waste from his new free stall barn.

Duncan recalls "all the red-tape" he had to go through with government officials to have the design approved. Now, he said, the timber-sided stacking areas are probably one of the most popular, feasible manure-handling systems that can be installed.

"The time and labor they save the farmer more than pays for stacking areas," Duncan claims.

He explains the "pit" collects the scrapings from 100 or so head of registered Holstein in milking string. The facility allows excess liquid to drain to a lagoon located in a pasture downstream from the buildings. This lagoon also catches waste water from the barn roof and milking parlor.

"I've never had to empty the lagoon," Duncan says. "It takes care of itself. And, if someone were to measure it, I would say I'd have zero runoff of dirty water from the

barn area." Keeping the water clean is important to this conservationist.

Since his installation of the stacking area, Duncan says he has eliminated the need to haul manure when conditions are unsuitable, like in the winter when the ground is frozen. Ever-conscious of his conservation ideals, Duncan says he empties his manure "pit" at plowing time — spring, fall, and after wheat harvest.

To empty the pit, Duncan explains he uses a skid loader, also used daily to scrape the barn floor, and a chain conveyor. The conveyor, Duncan says, can fill a big manure spreader in about 50 seconds — saving time. And, with the stacking area, there is no need to run pumps to agitate the manure before emptying. The system lends itself efficiently to hauling from 65 to 70 loads of manure to the field in a day, depending on distance, he adds.

As far as the manure storage facility saving fertilizer nutrients, Duncan says he thinks that angle is a gimmick for a sales pitch since manure doesn't contain much in fertilizer value.

"You're talking pennies there," he says, then pausing adds, "you have to make dollars."

Duncan emphasizes the concerns of many farmers, that stacking areas or lagoons will create more problems with flies and odor, haven't been a problem with his system.

"The only day there is an odor from the lagoon is when the ice comes off in the spring. Then there is a sewer-type smell for about two days. And we haven't had any more flies than are normal around a barn, although we have had more mosquitos — but not anything we can't tolerate," he smiles.

Duncan has been a cooperator with the Berks County Conservation District since he began farming in the early 1950s. Now he

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After a morning of milking, feeding, nursing, and breeding their herd of Holstein cows and calves, the Duncans enjoy sitting down to a hearty breakfast. At times like these, they discuss industry ideas and politics — both Ann and Don are active in local and state organizations.



Duncan skids the manure from the loafing area next to the free stall barn into the timber-sided manure stacking area. Since it was one of the first of its kind to be constructed in the state, Duncan said he had to deal with a lot of red tape. Downstream from the "pit" is a lagoon which collects rain water from the barn roof, milking parlor, and runoff.



Donald and Ann Duncan, Robesonia, operate a conservation-minded dairy operation. Soil conservation practices were found on the cropland fields, a manure handling system keeps the water leaving the farm clean, and modern innovations, like this straight-through milking parlor, save time and energy.



The Duncans raise all their calves in vealer crates in the barn. According to Ann, who takes charge of the care and feeding of these future feeder steers and replacement heifers, it would take too many hutches to hold them all. She explained the fans give the calves the right ventilation — before they were installed, the mortality rate for the calves in the barn was higher.