Dairyman blames PP&L for loss of herd

suspects stray voltage

BY DONNA TOMMELLEO

WILLIAMSPORT — A Lycoming County dairy farmer said he will sue Pennsylvania Power and Light Company for more than $1 million for damages in cattle and production losses resulting from severe mastitis that he claimed was caused by stray voltage from PP&L equipment.

As a result, Steven E. Schriner sold his entire milking herd of 600 cows for beef, last month. Schriner recently purchased 37 cows to milk at his father's farm.

According to Schriner's lawyer Mike Casale, Jr., it will be some time before the case actually gets to court. Meanwhile, the Williamsport dairyman has filed for bankruptcy reorganization, which enables him to pay bills and prevents creditor lawsuits and Farmers' Home Administration forclosure.

Schriner said he and wife Terry got an electrical shock while milking in their double-seven, computer-operated parlor about two years ago.

The power company was consulted, said Schriner. A PP&L report said at the time the company was not aware of any voltage levels that would be harmful to cows. The electrical system was checked, readings were taken and additional grounding was put in.

But Schriner said his problem persisted. He said cows kept getting shocked, not only in the parlor but in the barnyard as well and could not eat or drink from the stainless steel bunks and troughs.

Shortly before Christmas 1981, Schriner called PP&L and said the shock problems continued. Upon investigating the Schriner farm, the PP & L report said the company took no readings and told Schriner the sytem was operating normally.

However, Schriner said his cows, beset with health problems, began dying at an alarming rate. In a two-week period, the 26-year-old farmer lost 44 cows. In the parlor, the herd was averaging a little more than 20 pounds a day.

In January 1982, PP&L again visited the farm and advised Schriner to look into purchasing an isolation transformer.

But Schriner said the advice came too late.

"Already seventy-five cows had died. The herd was ruined," he said.

By late January, Steve Schriner quit shipping milk. In all, 100 cows had died and by mid-February the remainder of the herd was sold for beef.

The final PP&L reading at the Schriner farm on Feb. 4 disclosed voltages that ranged from .5 to 1.98. According to the report, if a cow had been connected to the milking machine under full load conditions, the readings would have been 1.42 volts.

According to Penn State Extension agriculture engineer Joe McCurdy, it does not take much voltage to create a problem. One volt often creates an immediate response in most cows.

If a cow makes contact at two points, one at neutral voltage and the other near the true ground (possible the milking parlor floor), the result is a flow of current through her body. The cow creates a point of contact by touching the sides of the stall, eating grain from a metal feeder, or drinking from a water bowl, says McCurdy.

A milking machine operator will seldom feel these voltages because of his or her body resistance and the insulating materials of boots and dry socks.

"Cows are much more sensitive than humans," said McCurdy. They do not have the luxury of insulated footwear — the combination of four bare feet on wet concrete and low body resistance allow the stray voltage to create a response at a very low level.

Stray voltage problems may have existed to some degree for many years, said McCurdy, but increased loads on rural distribution systems and greater exposure of dairy herds in milking parlors and on milking lines in modern dairy operations cause new problems and concerns.

Except for young stock, the Steven Schriner farm is quiet, these days. Five full silos out of nine is more than enough to keep his new herd of 37 cows fed. Isolation transformers have been installed at both his farm and his father's, where the new herd is averaging 60 pounds of milk a day.

Both he and wife Terry admitted that neither one wants to expand the operation to its previous size, however Schriner said he expects to put on another 100 cows in the next month.

Potato referendum

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Many grower's echoed MacKenzie's sentiments and said a cut-back in research could only hinder the the revitalization of the Eastern potato.

"With transportation costs all but prohibitive and the population of the Northeast being so large, our position becomes more vital to all," said Somerset County grower William Ringler.

"Energy will be conserved, the public served and the grower can continue if we develop new varieties and find new and better ways to produce and market the potato," Ringler added.

While lack of federal funds contributed to the programs problems, some producers agreed the "New Federalism," would be more beneficial in the long run.

"We get more use of our dollars if closer control can be maintained on a more local or state scale," commented Ray Friedline, also of Somerset County.

"If at some future time, additional funds would be needed for research and development — additional assessments should be made," Friedline said.

Erie County producer Glenn Troyer admitted that while government support of agriculture research is desirable, the ballooning federal deficit is not.

"Support of the Pennsylvania potato industry, at least in part, by those in the industry is a sensible approach to better business and less government dependency," Troyer concluded.

Every penny helps

In the past six years, Pennsylvania's 300 potato growers have helped support the state's potato research program with their penny per hundredweight chip-in. Now, threatened by a halt of state and federal funds, which amount to a $100,000 annual loss, the growers will vote next month to raise their assessment to two cents.

David MacKenzie, plant pathologist at Penn State and director of the research program, presented the following testimony at Tuesday's hearing which outlined significant contributions from the research order.

The state's research marketing order has permitted the development of the Potato Research Seed Farm located in Centre County on the Allegheny Plateau. The 100-acre farm is geared toward a longe-range effort to develop replacement varieties for the state's potato industry. The 40 foot by 40 foot barn houses the necessary supplies which has allowed the research program to cultivate, evaluate and perpetuate one of the finest collections of potato germplasm available in the world.

The Potato Storage Facility, two miles from the Seed Farm, is a renovated Navy Test Lab located at Black Moshannon State Park. The environmentally controlled facilities provide excellent long-term storage of named potato varieties and valuable breeding material that dates back 35 years.

The Potato Quality Lab, located at Penn State's Rock Springs Experimental Station, permits continuing genetic evaluation of new potato clones for processing and culinary qualities. Clones can be tested for chipping quality after low-temperature storage, content of dry matter by specific gravity measurement, boiling characteristics and microwave use.