

Hostetter dairy: Conservation pays in many ways

BY WENDY WEHR

MCVEYTOWN—James Hostetter is a dairy farmer who believes in conservation. He and his wife Patricia have just won a national soil and water conservation award for their outstanding conservation practices. But in other aspects of his dairy operation he also practices conservation, conservation of time and labor for one, and of precious capital inputs for another.

But don't get the wrong idea — practicing conservation and being conservative aren't necessarily the same thing. Hostetter has made his share of innovative changes in his dairy operation over the years as well.

Hostetter has 47 milking head of registered Holsteins on his farm, which is nestled between the ridges of Mifflin County west of Lewistown. His son Gregory is part of the operation these days, too, but while his son and daughter were growing up and in college,

Dairy Exclusive

James Hostetter set up an efficient one-man dairy operation.

Hostetter has been dairy farming for 20 years. But his involvement in the dairy industry began before that, as a DHIA milk tester in Mifflin County for 12 years and also as a handler of Chore-Boy milking equipment.

Although during those 12 years he knew he wanted to have his own dairy operation, Hostetter waited for the right opportunity to purchase a place and get started with his own herd.

The previous owner of the Hostetter farm had milked some Guernseys, so the first order of business after purchasing the place was to do some remodeling, such as improving and increasing the size of the stanchions in the barn for the Holsteins and building a new milkhous.

"At that time I could have spent \$40,000 to \$50,000 on a milking parlor," says Hostetter, "but instead I invested around \$3,000 on improving what was already here."

Hostetter is sold on the practicality and efficiency of flat milking barns, although he admits that all the stooping during milking does bother some people.

For Hostetter the beauty of his set-up is that it is all on one level and all under roof, making chore time more pleasant and easier for one person. With stanchions for milking on part of the lower level of the bank barn, the surrounding barnyard and other buildings are used for free-stall housing for the different groups of cattle.

When calves reach two months of age they enter their first pen and then are graduated through three different free-stall areas. Hostetter has an excellent record for growing replacements.

"We rarely lose any calves," he noted, "I really can't remember the last time we lost a heifer here."

It was nearly 10 years ago that the Hostetters set up separate housing for the dry cows, a real improvement in the free-stall operation.

"We had had our dry cows in with the others," he explained, "but they were really eating too much silage and getting too fat. And then we were having problems with displaced stomachs."

To get the dry cows away from the free-choice silage bunk, they built 10 stalls and two box stalls away from the other cows.

"When I walk out here each morning and evening, I can easily look over the dry cows and see if any are ready to freshen and then put them in the box stalls," describes Hostetter. Since that improvement there has been a real savings in feed and the dry cows are in much better condition as they begin their next lactation.

All in all, the Hostetter operation is a step saver, easily managed by one person. Hayfeeding, for instance, was streamlined with the introduction of the big round bales.

Hostetter only needs to put out a round bale once a week for the cows.

The Hostetter herd has a rolling herd average of a little over 18,000 lbs. milk and 720 lbs. fat with a four percent test.

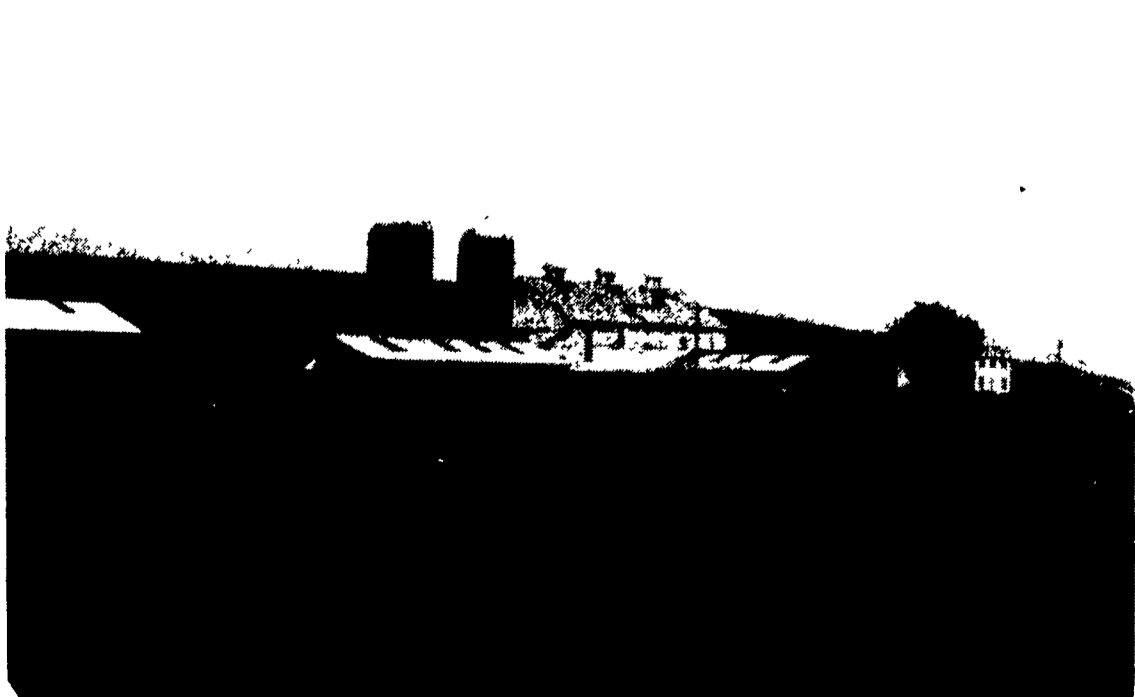
Although sound management practices in a number of areas contribute to the above average production records, a definite boost to production was James

no-till planter



James Hostetter believes planting no-till is a good conservation measure. He purchased this no-till seeder last spring and was pleased with his stand of no-till alfalfa.

Picturesque Mifflin County farm



The Hostetter dairy farm is a compact free-stall operation that's all on one level and under roof.

James and Patricia



James and Patricia Hostetter, Mifflin County dairy couple and finalists in the National Soil and Water Conservation Awards program.

Dry cow housing



The separate dry cow housing includes free-stalls and useful box stalls for just-fresh cows and heifers.

Hostetter's decision to participate in the mobile near-infrared analysis program of Penn State.

In an effort to make the latest technology in feed and forage analysis available to the farmers, Penn State began a pilot project over a year ago in which the computers and analysis equipment are all in a van that goes out to the farms. On-the-spot feed testing is completed and ration programs developed.

"Since we started on the program about a year and a half ago, our rolling herd average has increased steadily every month," states Hostetter.

The mobile testing unit comes to the farm once a month to test the forage, hay, silage, and grain mix, explains Hostetter. The tests produce same-day results, analyzing what the farmer is feeding now and then suggesting a feeding program for the next month. This contrasts to other feed analyses that may have as long as a three-week delay before the farmer obtains any results or recommendations.

The success of the first year of

the program led to a continuation of the project on a fee-schedule that is set up to pay its own way. Hostetter still thinks its economical and is sold on the benefit of the program.

"For instance, last month they recommended that I drop the protein down to 11 percent. Normally, I would have said that's not enough and kept right on feeding 14 or 15 percent. But I reduced the protein, saved on feed costs, and our milk production still increased.

The testing program gives you confidence to make changes."

Usually the Hostetters raise all the alfalfa and corn that they need for the cows, and have some left to sell. They farm about 180 acres, 100 owned and 80 acres of nearby rented land. Even after last year's poor growing season, they had enough roughage and nearly enough corn, says Hostetter.

And that's one reason they decided not to participate in the milk diversion program. "We did think strongly about participating, because everyone needs to help get production in line with demand,

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