Countrymans employ dynamic new "worker" for stanchion feeding

BY WENDY WEHR

BERLIN — A new worker has taken over the feeding chores in Paul and Dave Countryman's 80-cow stanchion barn.

This worker is on duty around the clock, moving up and down the barn and feeding the cows eight times a day without a reminder.

This worker knows every cow and feeds her exactly according to her production, not an ounce more or less when dropping concentrate in front of her nose.

This worker even makes sure Bossie isn't stealing grain from Bessie, and watches and remembers every cow who's off her feed.

Is this worker the hired man of every farmer's dreams? Well, not exactly. This worker is actually a new computerized feeding system for a stanchion operation.

In place at the Countryman's since February, this Farmtronix computerized stanchion feeder is the first to be installed in the eastern United States.

Paul and Dave Countryman, operators of Landsdown Farm, Somerset County, are already owners of one of the state's leading registered Holstein herds. They decided to add this "new worker" to their management scheme to reap the benefits of feed and labor savings, and, eventually, achieve slight gains in milk or fat production.

A reliable, accurate worker

"The computer feeder doesn't do anything we couldn't do," says Dave Countryman, "it just does it better."

Walk in the Countrymans' clean and airy 80-cow stanchion barn at any time of day or night and you can see what Dave means. A travelling trolley feeder moves up and down each of the two outside feed alleys, pausing in front of each cow, identifying her and letting down part of her designated ration if she begins to eat.

This system replaces the family's former schedule of feeding grain and concentrate to the cows three times a day by hand. Now the computer feeds the two rations eight times a day, spaced evenly over a 24-hour period.

The advantage of feeding the cows more often is also coupled with increased accuracy in dispensing feed and recording exactly how much each cow has eaten.

When the feeder stops in front of a cow, an identifier picks up the frequency emitted by her neck tag. As the computer identifies her, it knows how much she has already eaten during that 24-hour period

and how much of each ration she has left in her allotment. Feed is dispensed accordingly.

"She doesn't lose it if she can't eat it," explains Paul about this feature of the system. If a cow doesn't eat, or eats only part of her allocation, the information is retained by the computer, and at the next feeding within that 24-hour period she has a chance to "catch up."

Paul and Dave emphasize that the computer feeds the cow, not the stall. They can take cows out or move them from one stall to another and the feeder still knows when and how much they ate.

The Countrymans' feeder is also programmed with a 90-second lag-time for each cow during the feeding. That is, she's given that time to get up and start eating, or to pause while she's eating, before the feeder moves on.

The cows are "nosey enough," says Paul, that they didn't have too much trouble adjusting to the feeder. "It's kind of amusing to come in the barn and see all the cows laying down except the cows who are eating and the two ahead of the feeder," he laughs.

Equipped with bins to hold the grain and concentrate, the feeder weighs nearly one ton when full. But it moves easily and quietly along the overhead tracks without disturbing the cows.

Even an agitator in the feeder, which makes one revolution every 10 minutes to keep the grain from bridging, hums almost soundlessly. The Countrymans feed high-moisture-ground-ear-corn, which hasn't caused any special dispensing problems.

Feed savings

"We have seen a feed savings in concentrate especially," says Dave about the new computer feeding system. He estimates that they're saving roughly 20 percent on concentrate.

By eliminating the age-old problems of low producers stealing feed from high producers and measuring done by the "scoop-full," feed waste is minimized.

"The cow that's supposed to have it gets it," remarks Dave. And the computer measures the ration carefully, weighing concentrate to one tenth of a pound.

And when you feed twice or three times a day, adds Dave, the feed lies in the trough most of the day and the cows salivate on it and eventually they won't eat it.

"When they get fresh feed from the computer feeder," he says, "they eat more of it, more often."

Herd health reports

While feed savings have shown
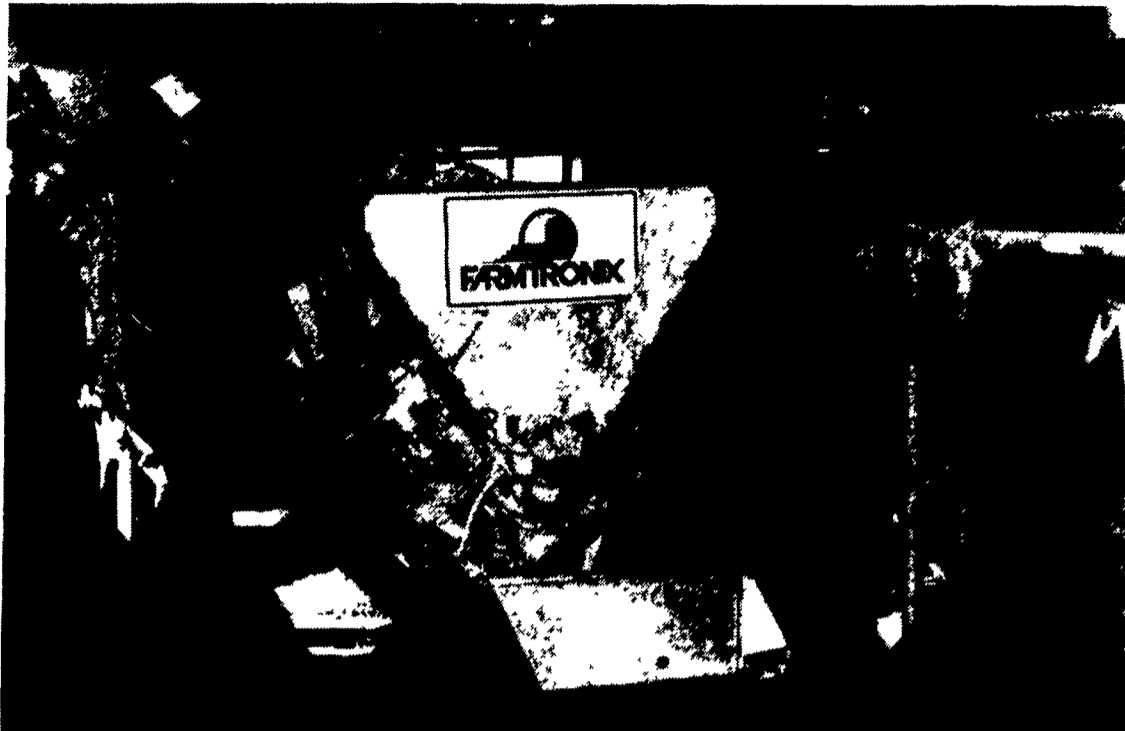
While one of the Landsdown cows eats part of her allocated rations from the travelling trolley feeder, Dave Countryman inspects a handful of high-moisture-ground-ear corn. He says the computer feeder handles the high-fiber feed well.

up almost immediately with the new feeder, production gains can't be documented so quickly. "Our fresh cows are doing well for us," says Dave. "But when a cow's 150 or 200 days into a lactation, you can't do much to change her curve."

"As the cows freshen, I hope to see higher and more consistent peaks," he adds. And he thinks that feeding more often might improve the fat test.

The real increase in production might actually come from improving the Landsdown herd's health and reproductive status, which is another bonus of the computer feeding system.

In each 24-hour period, the feeding computer supplies two reports on how much feed of her allocation each cow has eaten. This herd health or "alarm" report highlights any cow who is 10 percent off feed, that is, consumed less than 90 percent of her allocation.

The "end" of the 24-hour day for the Landsdown herd is at 3 p.m. So before milking, Dave can review the report and then check on cows that are off feed to see if they are sick, in heat, or have some other problem.

"I pick it up a little quicker here," says Dave about spotting potential health problems in the herd. "Before, if the boys cleaned the feed trough out, they sometimes forgot to tell me," he adds.

Service important

With feed savings, and possible production increases, how long will it take for the computer to pay for itself?

"Ask me a year from now," laughs Dave. Actually, he says, it depends on whether you count only the feed savings or also the labor savings, convenience and other factors.

"I'd like to see us pay for it in two years, but I don't know if we can do it," he says.

Larry Hay, field manager for Farmtronix, says that the computer can pay for itself in three to four years, strictly on feed savings, not milk increase.

Hay gives an average figure of $25,000 to $30,000 for the stanchion feeder, depending on the installation. Or the investment can be figured as cost per cow at $320 per cow, or more for smaller herds.

Hay has worked closely with the Countrymans as they installed the stanchion computer feeders and worked the bugs out of the system.

He says he "won't be satisfied until the system works 110 percent for them."

This philosophy is appreciated by the Countrymans. "It's only as good as the service," says Paul about the feeder. "You can't be coming in here every other day and have it not feeding cows. Have it off one day and it will take three days for the cows to come back on production."

But reliability has been no problem with the Countryman's first-of-a-kind system.

In fact, the system has worked so smoothly that Paul and Dave are ready to host a Farmtronix-sponsored open house at their farm. On July 9 interested dairy farmers can visit Landsdown Farm and see the stanchion feeding system in operation.

Landsdown herd

Hay says he worked hard to get the first system installed at an exceptionally good farm, such as the Countrymans have. The addition of the computer feeder at

The Countrymans' clean, airy, 80-cow stanchion barn is an excellent setting for the innovative computer feeding system.

At the computer control panel, Dave can set each cow's allocation or call up her daily feed consumption.