Efficiency is alive and well and living at Four-Co Farm

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DILLSBURG – The future belongs to the efficient.

No one believes that more than Doug and John Cope. At their Four-Co Farm, located in York County's northwest corner, this new family dairying operation is intent on proving that they intend to be around for the future on this changing industry.

Four-Co has been in business less than one year. Although the Copes put together their herd, and began shipping milk just last April, the family has been part of the area's dairying scene for many years.

John is manager of Ashecombe Farms and Dairy, located at Mechanicsburg. He and his wife Helen have resided for many years on the large Ashecombe operation, which includes a jugging and retail dairy store, as well as a large garden center and plant outlet.

As a boy, Doug grew up helping around the dairy farm his father manages. But it was the machinery and field work he preferred, over milking chores and work with cows. That all changed when Doug entered Delaware Valley College, where he graduated with a dairy science degree.

After college, Doug went to work for two years at the New Jersey dairying business of Lester Jones and Sons. And he married hs wife Joanne, a New Jersey native and classmate at DVC.

But the lure of central Pennsylvania was a strong one. When an opening for a herd manager at the Ashecombe's "branch" operation - at Dover in York County - was available, Doug and Joanne relocated. For six years, he managed the dairy herd supplying milk for Ashecombe Dover Dairy's retail store.

But a long-time dream of their own farm nagged at these two generations of Copes. And, when a farm about midway between the two Ashecombe locations tacked up a "for sale" sign, John and Helen, and Doug and Joanne, made their move to acquire land.

While the economy of dairying has not attracted a stampede of family farm interests over the past few cost-price-squeeze years, the four Copes - and that's the source of the Four-Co name - figured the time was right for their move.

"Or, don't buy when everyone else wants in," is how John saw the timing.

"Cow prices were down and we could buy some pedigreed animals at decent prices," elaborates Doug.

A rapid uphill climb on DHIA records already points to a successful beginning. Rolling herd average on the 48 head just passed the 16,200 milk and 578 fat mark, jumping a whopping 300 pounds of milk production in just one month span from January to February.

The Copes initially purchased a 42-head herd to move into their barn, adding others acquired "here and there," largely freshening heifers purchasd earlier at the state and county calf and bred heifer consignment sales.

"Production is our number one priority," explains Doug. And second in importance is the goal of merchandising offspring of the herd, ideally within two years. Heifer births through the first year, however, haven't leaned in favor of Four-Co. Out of 45 calves born, only 16 have been females.

But with merchandising in mind, additions to the herd must be of decent pedigree, and of popular bloodlines. Sires are selected to meet the production-merchandising guidelines, with the likes of Kirk Boy, Royalty, Tradition, Rusty and an occasional Ned Boy turning up on the breeding records.

A quick trip around the barn starts with John pinpointing his favorite: a Valiant daughter, four years old and scored VG-85. With early records over 20,000 milk and 830 fat, she's already been included in the Holstein Association's Locator List of elite cattle. From an EX-90 Kingpin, this Four-Co headliner has four maternal brothers in A.I.

The future belongs to the efficient and two generations of the Cope family plan to be part of it. Flanking a favorite Valiant daughter in the Four-Co herd are, from left, Doug, John, Joanne and Helen Cope.

Across the center alley is a ten-year-old Elevation. Scored VG-86, she puts out lactations over 30,000 milk, has one son in A.I., and created some emotional devastation among the four Copes when the bull calf she was carrying on contract died.

Also in the herd is a VG-87 Conductor daughter, bred back to the popular Bell. Doug made that crossing after an earlier Bell daughter from her just scored VG-85 as a two-year-old in the York County herd of Jim and Holly McCaffree.

With efficiency the watchwork on this family farm, the feeding program centers on feedstuffs raised on the acres that surround the big, red, remodeled bank barn. Of the 85 total tillable acres, 45 are planted to corn, with another 25 in alfalfa and about six in mixed timothy hay.

Bulk of the ration is corn silage and dry hay. Bi-carb gets added to grain feedings for a buffering agent, and high producers in early lactation earn a supplemental top-dressing of a forty-percent protein booster concentrate. Plans for the upcoming spring feed harvest season center on adding haylage to the herd diet.

Copes keep close tabs on return over costs, so, at least for a while, consideration of isoacids to boost production is on a distant hold. Doug figures that he hasn't worked with the herd long enough to feel completely comfortable assessing the capabilities of individual cows, to justify the costs of the production-boosting additive.

"We're not spending any money that we're uncertain of getting back in return," he relates, preferring a cautious approach to the isoacid feeding development.

Feeding, from Doug's point of view, has been a real adjustment for him to make in managing the smaller, tie-stall-kept herd, after handling a large, mechanized operation for six years.

"I've had to go from push-button to hand management feeding. Some days I still don't think I have that down yet," he grins, noting some frustration over the time it takes to make several trips around the barn with the various feed ingredients.

Still, the Copes plan caution in any changes to the operation, stressing that improvements in the immediate future will definitely be geared toward boosting milk output per person.

In spite of clouds hanging over the economics of the dairy industry, and troubled uncertainty about future prices and surplus problems, the Cope family remains optimistic about taking the plunge into family farming.

"There's a major similarity between the current stituation of the dairy industry and the problems of the steel and automobile industries," observes John.

"We'll come out of it, with the dairy industry intact, but with a different set of measures and standards by which we evaluate success."

Four-Co Farm is the last farm shipping milk in rural Carroll Township in northwestern York County, and a testimony to the optimism of the John and Doug Cope families.

A former chicken house at the Cope farm has transformed from hatches to hutches, housing heifer calves in a handy building near the dairy barn.

Potato group forms ethanol committee

DENVER, CO – A newly formed National Potato Council Ethanol Subcommittee will work to promote the use of ethanol as an economical and environmentally safe additive to fuel.

The Ethanol Subcommittee, formed during the National Potato Council's annual Washington, D.C. Steering Committee Meeting, Feb. 18-21, will set up a program to carry out a NPC resolution which stresses the U.S. potato grower's support of ethanol fuel development.

The resolution, unanimously adopted by the 150-member NPC Board of Directors during the Council's 37th Annual Meeting in January, 1986, states: "The National Potato Council supports extensive advertising and promotion programs for ethanol that would focus attention to the benefits to agriculture, the balance of trade, new jobs, local capital investment and reduced oil and ethanol imports."

The resolution also supports the continuation of an increase in the ethanol fuel tax exemption on the federal and state level, the diversion of Commodity Credit Corporation surplus stocks into ethanol production and the restoration of federal energy tax credits solely for the construction of ethanol plants.

In 1984, ethanol-blended gasoline (which used about 175 million bushels of corn) represented 5.6 percent of national gasoline sales, a report from the Renewable Fuels Association stated.

An increase to 10 percent ethanol in every gallon of gasoline consumed in the country could utilize almost half of the corn produced, Merle Anderson, Climax, Minn., chairman of the NPC Ethanol Subcommittee, said. The increased demand for ethanol enhanced fuels will help deplete some of the grain surpluses and will improve the overall agricultural market, Anderson said.

Also, increasing ethanol production will open a market for lower quality agricultural products, Anderson said.

Corn, barley and wheat are the primary crops for ethanol production. However, potatoes or any commodity which contains starch and sugar could be used, Anderson said.

Anderson explained that the National Potato Council is supporting this increase in ethanol production to support agriculture in general. Also, most potato growers raise other crops which could be used economically for ethanol production, Anderson said

While in Washington, D.C., the newly formed NPC Ethanol Subcommittee met with the leaders from the National Corn Association, the National Wheat Growers and the National Barley Growers. During their first meeting, the commodity leaders agreed to work closely together to promote the increased use of ethanol.

"We invite other interested organizations to work with us to support ethanol," Anderson said "Agriculture is having financial trouble– this is one way farmers can help themselves."

Along with Anderson, the following potato growers were named to serve on the NPC Ethanol Subcommittee: Jerry Larson, Climax, Minn.; Dave Long, Othello, Wash. and Larry Young, Howard City, Mich.