

# Virginians Take Cell Counts, Mastitis Control Seriously

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PENN LAIRD, Va. — Large or small, commercial or registered, Virginia dairyman take somatic cell counts and mastitis control in their herds seriously. Even those with the lowest numbers in the state take nothing for granted, each practicing a stringent management program tailored to their operation.

No one more so than Eldon Rhodes. Rhodes owns and operates Hideaway Dairy, a 78 head commercial operation just west of Harrisonburg. On DHIA reports, 92 percent of Rhodes' Holsteins test less than 142,000 cells per cow, and with a 1.2 percent herd average, the Mennonite dairyman has the lowest cell count in the state.

"You just have to look up and be thankful; next year you never know what will happen and that's the way I look at it," he explains. "Even if I do all the same things this coming year, I might be on the bottom of the stack 12 months from now," Rhodes laughs.

While giving Providence credit where credit is due, Rhodes admits he and his family work hard at keeping their cell counts low. "Anytime you start talking about somatic cell count, everyone will say you have to pay strict attention to your equipment and make sure your pulsation is right. As far as our facilities are concerned, we were outdated 20 years ago. We have a single three-side open stalls with three univalve units," he adds.

"One thing that I think is quite important," Rhodes emphasizes, "is finding a teat dip that covers the bacteria that you relate to, the particular bugs on your farm. It might be coliform, it might be strep, e. coli, staph — all farms are going to have that — but you need to find a tip dip that gives you a broad base," he says, speaking from experience. "About 10 years ago I wanted to get away from the iodine based dips so we changed and within 30 days went to a 400,000 count." It took him two months to reverse the problem, he recalls,

and he still uses an iodine based dip today.

Rhodes also admits to being a little old fashioned in the milking parlor. "I like to let the cows drip a short while after I wash them before I even dry them. If a cow comes in real dirty, we'll wash her as clean as possible and then she might stand for a minute before I dry her. Then if it happens to take three towels to get her dry, use three towels before you put the units on."

The Mennonite and his family do all their own milking and keep a close watch for any early signs of a problem. "It's something we and the children make a conscious effort of," he explains, noting that flare ups often occur "like bananas, in bunches," due to changes in everything from rations to the weather. Close visual checks almost always turn up the problems and Rhodes likes to begin treatment at the first sign of trouble.

The history of the cow often predetermines the treatment. "Through past experience you learn one cow will respond to a drug while another one won't. We do use one product my supplier kids me about, saying I'm the only one in the area who uses it and he stocks it just from me.

"It's not antibiotic, it's a somatostaph. If a cow comes in with a swollen quarter a lot of times that will take care of it with no discard or other treatment. Costwise, if you figure out what it's going to cost to dump milk, you're much further ahead (to use it) if the cow is going to respond."

Controlling mastitis also means controlling costs, Rhodes points out. Not only does less milk have to be dumped, but less farm income goes for veterinarian services and mastitis medicine. Furthermore, he notes, the more problem a cow has with mastitis, the less productive she becomes and the more expensive to maintain.

Some cell count is beneficial, however, he notes. "In the past I have had individual months that we've gotten down to .5 or .6 and in

discussing it with my veterinarian, he warned me to be careful, that you actually want enough somatic cell count there that the cows are basically building antibodies — that if you get it too low, it's like a person without any immunity toward disease. Most often that's not the case where you need to be concerned," he laughs, "But there is that possibility, as my veterinarian pointed out."

Controlling somatic cell count benefits both the dairyman and his herd, but there's more to it than that, Rhodes believes. "It also gives you a sense of personal satisfaction to know you're producing a quality product," the farmer adds.

"We like to use a standard on the farm. If we can't drink it, we're not interested in putting it in the tank for someone else to drink. Consequently, we're very conscious of the quality of our product. The higher somatic cell count you've got, the more mastitis problem you've got, and who wants to drink that," he asks.

At Maple Lane Farm just down the road from Hideaway, Tom Kegley and his son-in-law/herdsman, Bill Link, also believe low somatic cell count reflects on the quality of job they do of dairying. Their 145 head of commercial Holsteins have a rolling herd average of approximately 20,100 pounds of milk with 690 pounds of fat and 605 pounds of protein. Ninety-three percent of their herd tests below 142,000 somatic cell count for an overall 1.7 percent average, one of the best in the state.

According to Link, achieving low somatic cell counts depends on many factors. "I think it's kind of like a puzzle with a lot of blocks stacked up like a pyramid — starting in the parlor. You have to get the cows clean and you have to get the cows dry. Then you have to maintain your equipment on top of that. We have a contract with our dealer and they come out twice a year and go over our whole system. And Tom knows that if they're not here, I start raising can."

The herdsman believes that it's a whole lot easier to stop a problem in the early stages than after it progresses. Two years ago he put in a new pulsation and changed the vacuum, favorably affecting his cell count. He also clips his herd twice a year, making them easier to clean and dry, and will cull a cow for re-occurring mastitis.

Cows coming into the Maple Lane double-eight herringbone parlor are hosed and washed down and then dried with paper towels before an iodine dip is used "If we have 130 cows in the parlor, we may treat one cow a month," Link estimates. "We seem to have outbreaks in the late summer when the fly population is heaviest. We'll send some cultures to the state lab once in a while," he adds.

Link usually waits to treat a cow until she shows clinical signs of mastitis and relies on DHIA reports as well as parlor observations. "We treat mostly with cephirin and that seems to work well here. Coliforms we treat differently, using a gentacin product." Like Rhodes, Link also treats every quarter of every cow he's drying off, but he switches products every 12 to 18 or 24 months to keep any immunity from building up.

"It works for us and if it ain't broke, don't fix it," Regley grins. "I don't know if I'm right, but you don't argue with success.

"As far as I'm concerned, the main benefit of low somatic cell count is milking cows you don't have to doctor all of the time," Kegley continues. "It's a whole lot nicer to go to the barn when you don't have a whole lot of cows to treat," his son-in-law agrees. The



Maple Lane Farm owner Tom Kegley (center) works with his son, Steve, (right) and son-in-law/herdsman Bill Link to maintain one of the lowest cell counts in Virginia.



At Maple Lane the management team believes that good help in the milking parlor is essential to maintaining low counts. Here milker Bobby Hoelzel prepares a cow for milking.

dairyman also note that they get 10-to-15 percent more milk from a cow with an unscarred udder and don't have to dump treated milk as frequently.

These results don't come easily though. "You have to do everything right," Link admits. "You have to do your job of milking cows right, sanitation right, not only in the parlor but in the barn. You've got to keep your barn clean," he says. "Our barn is scraped Christmas day, Sundays or if we have the flu — we scrape once a day and the barn is bedded every two weeks with shredded straw. It doesn't happen by accident."

That's why they emphasize mastitis control at Maple Lane, Link says. "It's just part of a sound management program that includes herd health and reproduction. They're all tied together and if you're weak in one, it takes away from the others, including income."

"It gets back to one thing," Kegley adds. "If you aren't going to take care of the details in one area, you're not going to do the proper things in the others. And the first thing you know, your management has going to hell. And that's what it comes down to — management. As far as somatic cell count and mastitis is concerned, I think mechanization, maintenance, sanitation and dedication have as much to do with it as anything. And the young people running this operation have it all together," he concludes, indicating his son, Steve, and Bill Link.

Another young dairyman successfully controlling his somatic cell count is Bernie Frye in neighboring Shenandoah County. With 89 percent of his herd testing below 142,000, Frye is among the top seven scoring herds in Virginia and also has a 1.7 percent average. Frye admits being surprised his

count is among the top in Virginia. "It must be luck," he laughs, "And that I'm there for all of the milkings."

Careful preparation is one area Frye deems essential to control somatic cell count. "We're real strict on preparing the cows before we milk them; we've been pre-dipping for several years, not in the sense that they recommend pre-dipping but we always wash the cows first and then pre-dip. Very important — anything we get wet, we get dry. If you leave wetness, it's a better environment for bacteria to grow."

Frye uses a dip with a chlorhexadine base. The dip also includes coconut oil to improve the skin tone of the udder. "It smells good and they're ladies too," he grins. In addition to visual checks at milking, Frye also massages the udders and will use a C.M.T. paddle as well. "I use it occasionally or if I suspect a cow is beginning to develop a problem. That can confirm a case before they get real bad. "It's a way of checking in between DHIA visits."

The dairyman considers mastitis to be a problem in his herd, despite his relatively low cell count. "Anybody that thinks they can eliminate mastitis altogether is crazy, I think you can keep it very well under control, but it's like the common cold, you can't eliminate it. We probably have more cases of clinical mastitis than a lot of herds because with a low somatic cell count, you have a low resistance and the cows either get it or they don't — there's no in-between.

"We'll usually treat anything at the first sign of sub-clinical development — that's where the paddle comes in — before they become clinically positive or you can really tell." Treatment varies depending on the severity of the care, and if the flare-up doesn't

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Eldon Rhodes owns and operates Hideaway Dairy near Harrisonburg. This year he recorded the lowest somatic cell count in Virginia with a count of 142,000 per cow.



Eldon Rhodes and his family do all the milking on their Harrisonburg farm. Pictured with Rhodes are, from left, Clinton, Eldon, Loren and Rosella. Missing from the photo is Darwin. The milk truck driver is Bill Myers.