

Forage Testing Built On Farmer Satisfaction

GAY BROWNLEE
Somerset Co. Correspondent

JENNERSTOWN (Somerset Co.)—Verdean and Alan Keyser used to be in the blueberry raising business. They raised four acres of them for the market. Although Verdean helped her husband, she also worked in an environmental laboratory.

She had a degree from Juniata College having majored in both chemistry and biology.

One day she was asked by a farmer, "Do you suppose you could test forage?"

Verdean recalls, "I didn't even know what the word meant." But the question started the pair thinking about the possibility of forage testing. They muddled over the idea. That was in the year 1982.

"We thought this would be a little venture on the side," said Verdean.

Alan added, "It was a good time because farmers were getting into computer."

So in 1984 the doors of Skyview Laboratory opened at the present Route 30 location, in an ordinary-looking older house that was adequate to accommodate the laboratory and its future expansion.

Verdean was well-educated with new information gathered during her trip to the state of Iowa to study soil-testing.

Alan's business school background coupled with his electrician experience in the service, enabled him to manage administration, while Verdean was in charge of the chemistry side of the new venture. Alan was also a local farmboy, who grew up on a nearby beef farm, compared to his city-girl wife, who was a native of Jeannette.

At first the two began the work day at 4 a.m. ending around 8 p.m. They managed during those hours to complete about 10 forage tests. Now they can perform 140 tests daily. Every detail about the for-

age is electronically recorded in the computer at each station. No hand writing is necessary.

With completion of each stage of testing, the information is sent to the main station terminal and permanently filed.

If he has a computer in his business, the farmer can receive his forage report in its entirety, 24 hours a day. Or he can locate specific information in minutes.

A simple telephone call to Skyview's 800 toll-free number is also an option for those without home computers. And some farmers opt for the facsimile immediately to receive a whole or partial report about his forage. A hard copy is also mailed to him.

"We have a network system that can go anywhere in the world," says Alan about the high-tech Skyview Lab.

The Keyseers, who shun marketing their business because they want to control steady growth, said having immediate access to the report of his forage contents is crucial for the farmer. They said he needs the report while feeding that particular forage to his livestock. It does little good, they said, to see the results arrive in the mailbox when the feed is already gone and he is switching to another type of forage.

"Service is of utmost importance," said Alan. "We don't take on any new work unless the lab is capable of not sacrificing the work."

They are a fully independent operation and belong to the Council of Independent Laboratories.

Including the Keyseers, the nine Skyview Lab employees each work an eight-hour day five days a week. One of them starts his day at 4 a.m. He's the guy who codes each sample upon its arrival at Skyview. He also observes the presence of other materials in the sample and records his findings prior to its further analysis. A number is also assigned to the sample.



At the computer is Verdean Keyser with her husband, Alan Keyser. They own and operate Skyview Laboratory, a wet-chemistry lab in Jennerstown.

The wet-chemistry lab analysis of the forage will reveal moisture content, protein, fiber levels and minerals. Thus, the farmer's nutritionist can tell him what he needs to adjust according to the test report. The farmer may have what he needs in the grain he's harvested on his own land. If so, he's financially ahead, said the Keyseers, since he won't need to purchase from an outside source.

"It's really an exciting field," said Verdean, who obviously enjoys her work. She illustrates the importance of a balanced livestock diet to that of a human. "It's like people who get sick when their diet is out of balance," she said. "It can affect breeding or milk feeding." She said a mistake in the feeding program can cause very serious problems for the cow's health, thus affecting milk production. "You need to be within one percent of accuracy in a program," she said.

That's why in an emergency, Skyview will occasionally do a rush test for a farmer. If a high milk-producing cow suddenly develops a health problem the far-

mer wants to find the source fast. So they also work with the veterinarian.

The Keyseers say they have met farmers who were disgusted with the length of time it took to receive their forage analyses from some other laboratories. "What we improved on was the time frame for farmers," they said.

Since their only marketing device is good old word-of-mouth advertising, the lab serves customers in 14 states including Pennsylvania, Maine, Florida, Indiana, California and those in-between. A close association with several colleges, such as Cornell University and Penn State ensures them of having access to the latest discoveries and most recently develop tests for forages. Another of their contacts is with Bolten Center, the veterinary school, located at Kennett Square.

They also speak at different colleges and have a conference room above the actual laboratory.

Especially stressed at Skyview is the environmental safety of the chemicals used in the lab, a major health concern in today's world.

Not only are some of them (chemicals) recycled, but there is on-site waste treatment. Nor are any of them on the hazardous chemicals list, according to Verdean.

With the Skyview network of users the laboratory serves as the information base for the feeding programs of some two million cows. The peak testing season starts in September and ends in December when new crops are stored and farms need programs done. In the slower months, the lab might run only 20 tests a day.

But on those busy days when more than 140 tests are run, the convenience of the computer modem can't be denied. Instruments at each of the four lab workstations are read directly into the computer making the results immediately available. The Keyseers say that's high-technology stuff and a big responsibility for a small business in a small community.

The Keyseers have two children in high school and junior high who are also getting involved in their parents' business.

Workshop For Teen Entrepreneurs

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — It's not too late for interested teens and adults to register for the multi-state Youth in Business Symposium: "Empowering Teen Entrepreneurs."

The two-day event will be held February 18-19 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel at the Inner Harbor in Baltimore, Maryland. It's sponsored by the 4-H component of the Cooperative Extension Service, Maryland Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The symposium agenda, which includes workshops, panel discussions and exhibits of teen businesses and model youth business programs, is divided into three tracks:

Track 1: Getting on with Business will give teen entrepreneurs access to the tools and knowledge they need to enhance their businesses and increase profitability. Workshops and seminars will focus on such issues as the principles of strategic business planning and strategies for overcoming obstacles.

Track 2: Getting Into Business will introduce teens consider-

ing starting their own businesses to the concept of entrepreneurship, the requirements for success, and the realistic opportunities available. Sessions will include such topics as how to start a business, how to sell an idea and where to find money to get started.

Track 3: Getting Down to Business is designed for professional youth workers, volunteers and parents. It will provide them with the information they need to plan, organize, implement and evaluate youth entrepreneurial programs. They will learn about principle-centered leadership development, opening the doors of the small business world, and the pros and cons of collaborative community-based youth enterpre-

nship programs.

The advance registration fee for the conference is \$85 for youth and \$145 for adults. This fee covers all symposium sessions, handouts, two luncheons, a dessert reception on February 18, continental breakfast on February 19, and a T-shirt. Lodging costs are not included. Single-day registration fees are \$55 and \$85 for youth and adults, respectively.

For more information or to register for the 1993 Youth in Business Symposium: "Empowering Teen Entrepreneurs," contact Edith Williams, Extension 4-H specialist, at (301) 403-4250 or Bill Clark, Baltimore Extension 4-H agent, at (410) 396-4906.



Lab technician, Sherry Yoder, is looking for the amounts of potassium and phosphorous in the sample she is testing at the Skyview Laboratory in Jennerstown, Pa.

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