Family, Future Is Farming; Farming Is Management

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Yes. The Sensenigs are now using Posilac, Monsanto Corp.'s recombinant form of bovine somatotropin (BST) that was approved last year by the Food and Drug Administration as an over-the-counter drug for use in lactating cows to stimulate additional milk production.

Although approved for use last year, the sale of the product was delayed until this February because of a first-ever moratorium imposed to determine potential economic impact.

(Determination of a product's potential economic impact had not previously been considered as a function of the FDA, since its purpose is to make objective determinations of safety and efficacy of products based on factual science. Some people were upset with the FDA's seeming political acquiescence to those objecting to the concept of Posilac. The argument is that in the future, given such a precedent, the FDA would be able to ban food or drugs because of social or economic impact, not because of anything dangerous to health in the materials.)

But even before using BST, his herd average — at more than 30,000 pounds — was the top in Lebanon County and one of the highest in the state.

The couple has been farming at their place since 1987.

According to Sensenig, the desire to use BST was to increase the economic base of the farm, i.e. higher milk output over financial input to get maximum cash-return flow.

The decision to use BST only came after having done plenty of homework first, and in talking with his consultants — before, during and while now using it.

Sensenig, 30, said he expects to continue using it because it works for him and it doesn't hurt his cows.

The 177-acre farm, the equipment, and the cows are the investment upon which he, his wife and four children depend to pay off debt and keep themselves healthy.

Anything that would hurt the cows would hurt the Sensenigs. "We praise the Lord for the way He has blessed us," Nelson said.

With that much at risk, he said that is why he is using such modern techniques as milking three times per day, feeding TMR, designing barns specifically for the cow rather than the cow-man, stressing cow comfort in every aspect, etc.

And, he said it is really the reason he is using BST. "It's a tool, just like any other tool," he said. "Making milk takes good management."

The Holsteins at Sensenigs are not a rare breed or even particularly the showcase of superior genetic achievement by a breeder, although Nelson does his own AI work and is getting some attention on genetics.

The majority of the herd consists of the cows and offspring that came from a farm where the rolling herd average was about 15,500 pounds of milk. Some other cows in the herd were purchased from farms with higher herd averages, but nothing close to what the animals have achieved at the Sensenig farm.

The same story has been told by researchers and many experts: management makes milk, not magic.

In fact, the genetic limit is not yet known as to how high an average production can be expected by a herd of any dairy cattle. Sensenigs' herd average could increase.

Glen Flickenger, an independent nutritionist who runs his own business, 21st Century Consulting, has been working with Sensenig since last year and the two have known each other since 1985.

"I can see Nelson obtaining a short term goal of (an average herd production of) 32,000 (pounds of milk), and obtaining a moderate (several years) goal of 35,000 (pounds of milk). I see him doing that," Flickenger said Wednesday during a telephone interview.

Flickenger praised Sensenig highly.

"There's just no substitute for (Nelson's) management," Flickenger said. "Nelson is a topnotch manager and the majority of Neslon's milk comes from Nelson's management. The thing is, I make a recommendation and go home. He's the one who makes it work. He carries it out. He gets the milk out of those cows.

"To me Nelson is the manager of the next century. He wants the people he works with to feed him information, to feed him the new technology and then he implements it and he is constantly looking for new information.

"He is outstanding, really outstanding. He's the kind of guy everybody wants to feed, because he'll make their product look good," Flickenger said.

Sensenig said that he works closely with his nutritionist and veterinarian, who also work with each other very closely concerning Sensenig's herd.

The trio consists of Sensenig, Flickenger and Dr. Timothy Trayer, an associate with Hutchison, Trayer and Reed, in Denver, Lancaster County.

Every two weeks, or within several days of two weeks, the three get together at the farm and do a herd health check.

"I find out when (Dr. Trayer) is coming and stay with him through the herd check, and we talk about it; about what he's seeing, what I'm seeing," Flickenger said. "In between visits we talk on the phone.

"I love working with Dr. Trayer," Flickenger said, "I realy do. It's a pleasure. The thing I like most is his honesty. If he doesn't like what I'm doing, he'll tell me, and I like that."

Trayer wasn't available for comment.

The background to the Sensenigs is that Nelson started off as an electrician after having grown up on his father's hog and beef farm. For three years he worked as an electrician. Then, at age 20, he married.

He and his wife Susan then dairy farmed for three years at Philhaven Farms in Lebanon County.

According to Nelson, the experience he got working there, under the tutelage of farm manager Aaron Shirk, is what prepared him for farming as an independent. "That's where I learned how to milk cows," Nelson said.

"I asked a lot of questions and he gave me a lot of answers. He was very patient," Nelson said of Shirk.

Susan got her start growing up on a dairy farm milking cows as a teenager. She is as involved in the milking at the farm as Nelson.

The farm they took over had been purchased by Nelson's father, Eugene, in 1985. It was a steer and hog operation with an old bank barn and other buildings, including a second house.

Large wooden ear corn cribs were converted into heifer stalls; one house was razed, as well as some other equipment buildings.

Part of the rock outcropping behind the barn was removed to provide more space behind the bank barn. From the side of the barn, Sensenig put on a single-story extension for the 92 tie stalls. He built a milk house with a 1,500-gallon tank (though he could use a larger one) about where the buildings meet.

In the back of the barn, three silos were erected. A 6-month storage, circular manure pit was built off of one of the front corners to receive the manure from the gutters.

Actually, his father and brothers worked a lot on building the new facility. Nelson did also, and with his electrician background, he did all the wiring.

In fact, it is still undergoing small improvements.

The approach the Sensenigs take to farming is to be aggressive in problem prevention, Nelson said. He said his goal is to learn as much as possible, to ask questions and ask for reasons when advice is given.

In order to keep the herd at a high level of production, Nelson tracks his DHIA records for changes. He tests his feed when it changes. He tests moisture content, etc..

Nelson said that, just like the reproductive problem he had at the farm, he knows there are many almost hidden things that can go wrong in managing a dairy operation, and the longer it takes to detect, the longer it takes to cure, if there is a cure.

It can be little, almost incedental things too.

He said that in one instance his 9-year-old son Joel was sweeping up some feed that had been spilling from the conveyor next to the Rissler TMR mixer and some of the feed apparently got under the scale on the mixer.

Until he discovered the error — by realizing that what he was measuring was much more than it should be for the volume — every time he measured an ingredient, the measure was off.

The problem was quickly corrected and apparently didn't cause any problems, but it was memorable because it re-emphasized the need to pay attention, to be analytical and systematic, to consider and monitor the entire operation on one level, and also to consider and monitor each component of the operation.

He said he may now consider using a known weight to do an occassional calibration check of his scales.

The high production levels at the Sensenig farm were not widely known, but they were talked about locally.

Even though Nelson officially requested that his Pennsylvania Dairy Herd Improvement Association records be kept private last year, people tend to find out in ballpark figures, how another is doing. Local dairymen familiar with the Sensenig operation already knew of his high production.

The request was made by Sensenig that his herd information not be published during that time for privacy reasons, which includes the well-known reason that nothing attracts friend, foe and salesmen like success.

Sensenig didn't need to attract anyone's attention — he had his hands full with the three-times per day milking, staying on top of his farm work and herd management, and with his family.

The old bank barn at Sensenig's dairy farm was remodeled with the expansion toward the house, the three silos and the milkhouse, just visible behind the automobile, among other things. It is a modern operation designed for cow comfort.

The same is true with Susan, who does the morning milking at 5 a.m., helps with the 1 p.m. milking and currently helps with the 9 p.m. milking, while Merle Wise, who does evening milkings sometimes, is busy with his regular job. And she has the four children — ranging in age from 1 to 9 — to care after.

Their schedule is full, by many standards, but Nelson said they do take time away from the farm. Three times per year, they take a vacation.

"You have to get away from it, to clear your head, if you want to keep enjoying it," he said, adding that he knows of many others who continue to stick to the daily routine so much they end up bitter.

Another benefit in getting away from the farm for a day or two is that it can help with recognizing subtle changes that may get overlooked in a day-in-day out routine.

Those are the changes Nelson seeks, the small ones before they get big ones.

Some people have suggested that those who seek to produce a lot of milk from each cow may be digging their own financial grave. The theory is that high numbers are possible, but the return doesn't justify the effort or overhead.

Nelson said he can understand that, but it isn't the case for his operation.

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As far as feeding a TMR, his recipe on Tuesday for 86 cows was for 425 pounds of supplement; 1,320 pounds of haylage; 1,075 pounds of silage; 890 pounds of high moisture corn; 255 pounds of cotton seed.

The supplement he uses is formulated by his nutritionist. And it is custom made.

The haylage and silage are farm raised. The cotton seed bought.

But working with an independent nutritionist is better for him, Sensenig said, because the consultant is not tied into any specific milling operation. In fact, though Flickenger said he doesn't do a lot of it, he puts out Sensenig's orders for bid.

Flickenger can calculate the components Sensenig needs, send out several requests for bids to several mills by fascimile machine, and then after about a two-week period review the offers.

Nelson said the differences between high and low bids has varied as much as $20 per ton.

Sensenig said he enjoys the team work approach to farming also.

"You have to surround yourself with people who are aggressive and up on the latest and who ask you questions that make you think," Nelson said.

"It's becoming more important to me to have a good relationship (exist between) the vet and nutritionist and they can work together to solve problems that arise."

Flickenger said the Sensenigs are special, enjoyable people.

"Because he loves what he does, he does it well," Flickenger said. "He doesn't neighbor-farm. Nelson does what is right for his farm at the given time that it is right.

"I see a lot of young farmers follow what the neighbor is doing. Nelson won't care if everyone else is mowing hay, if his is not (at the right maturity). And he doesn't care if no one else is mowing hay. He will, if his is right and that's what makes him different," Flickenger said.