

Dairy MAP Is Family Matter

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Lancaster Farming Staff
FOMBELL (Lawrence Co.) — Tim Sturgeon is the head of a dairy farm family in Fombell that depends entirely on selling milk and Holstein cattle.

The farm from which the family makes its living has been in their family since about 1870. It is located about 50 miles from Pittsburgh and occupies about 180 acres of hilly, clay-type soil. About 150 additional acres are rented.

The family members are Tim and his wife Kathy, and their three sons — Blane, 12, Wade, 18, and Thad, 21, a senior at Penn State University, and also a 1994 national Holstein Association distinguished junior member.

The Sturgeons milk about 60 Holsteins, mostly registered, with some grade recipient cows used because they do a lot of embryo work.

When Tim was a student at Elwood City High School 30 years ago, there were 20 or so farm families whose children attended school, he said.

Today, the graduating classes have enlarged to more than 200, but at present there are only two full-time farm families with children in the school district. And the other farm family is a neighbor to the Sturgeons.

The situation is similar in many areas.

Whereas the amount of milk needed to be sold in order to support a family has increased dramatically over time, and with the number of mega-dairies competing with smaller farms, the stability of family dairy farms has decreased and many of those farms have disappeared.

The pressure of survival has been increasing on the family farm operation, and is expected to remain.

For these reasons, an educational outreach program was created within the state to help dairy farm families and managers of larger dairy operations.

It is called the Dairy MAP (management and profitability) program, and it is in its third year of being offered through a collaborative effort between the Penn State University Cooperative Extension Service and the Pennsylvania dairy industry.

Earlier this year, Tim Sturgeon attended a Dairy MAP workshop series in his area.

Designed as a two-day workshop, the Dairy MAP program cost \$100 per farm which entitles two people to attend. Tim went alone.

"If I had to do it again, I would have had my wife go along too. I shouldn't just say wife, we have (sons) ... it is just as beneficial for them, if not more beneficial than for my wife an I," Tim said.

So, with ever-tightening cash

flows, it may not seem like the best time to divert part of the milk check to pay for a seminar on how to stay in business.

But Sturgeon said attending the workshop may have been the one thing he did recently that will give him a better chance at staying a full-time dairyman.

"I guess the person who thinks he's doing everything right, ought to stay home. (If that person does attend) he's going to find out he's not doing everything right," Tim said.

While a \$100 fee may seem steep, Sturgeon said that for him it was definitely money well spent.

"The cost is irrelevant, from what we got out of it," he said. "I do a better job. I do a lot better job of record keeping."

Sturgeon was doing pretty well farming before attending the workshop. He has had his cattle on test for at least 30 years. He raises his own corn, hay, some soybeans, (quit raising small grains), and beds his cattle with wood shavings, locally available and inexpensive.

"We're going to expand, and I wanted to learn about anything that has to do with expansion that we can learn. (Expanding a dairy operation) is a long-range planning process, not something you do right away.

"The thing is, we all (the Sturgeon family) get along really well,

but I wanted to get along better."

According to Sturgeon, the workshops he attended were held in the style of an open meeting, "And we did a lot of talking among ourselves and it gave us a good idea of how others were doing, and everybody seemed really open with each other, and that was nice," he said.

But Tim said he got more than good conversation from the workshops.

The Sturgeons now have a mission statement for their farm.

There is a week between meetings in the two-day workshop series. During that time, participants are given homework to do. Part of the homework for Tim Sturgeon was to develop a farm mission statement.

"Our mission is to produce a quality dairy product and to merchandise a top genetic animal, with an emphasis on honesty and respect, not only to others, but by others; to distinguish family values, work in harmony, and be accepted as a businessman, while portraying a Christian image and creating a standard accepted by the consumer.

"We as a family wrote that," Sturgeon said, explaining how they sat down and considered it, all of them, and worked it out. And that they keep it.

Also, the family is closer and communicating better through weekly family meetings, which Sturgeon said started as a result of his attending Dairy MAP.

There are many other changes that came about.

As an example, Sturgeon said he keeps a notebook with him and he

writes down how much milk is shipped, what the milk price is, somatic cell count and milk-component production, and other information he needs. He said having ready access to this information when making decisions around the farm allow him to make better-based decisions.

He said by keeping track of the daily milk weight slips, he can keep track of how much he is shipping, especially during times of feed changes.

Information from his notes is recorded on the home computer, although he doesn't use the computer often himself, except for searching for bulls. But his wife and sons can use the computer well.

Tim said months after attending the workshop, he realized that he took home more information than he thought, including a better attitude about how to get things done.

"I guess I would have to say, (I learned) management techniques, and, more than anything, how to work with your help.

"I've always tried to teach the help to have responsibility, even if it's one little thing.

"Our youngest boy, he takes care of (calves). That's his job. But I think that's one thing we talked about at the session — even though I'm the elder person here, instead of being boss and saying, 'You do that and this,' give responsibilities, and make sure that if you are not around, someone can do it.

"Wade, our middle boy ... is basically in charge of (maintaining the quality of the total mixed ration),"

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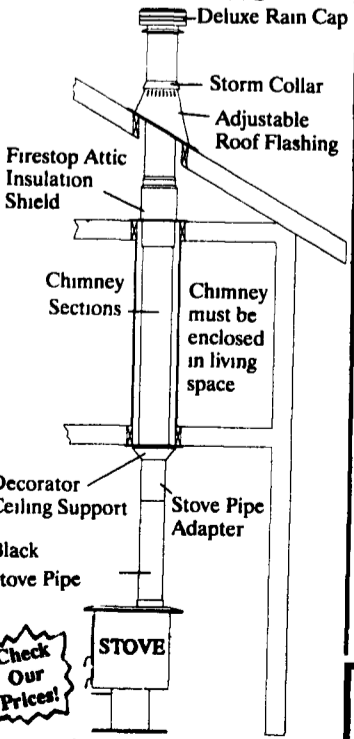
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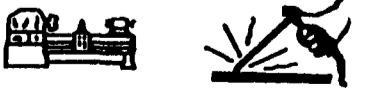
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