

Music May Be Melodious To Cow, Worker Performance

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ELIZABETHTOWN (Lancaster Co.)—Some producers may be whining about the grim economic realities of dairying.

Better yet, they could be singing.

No, we don't mean singing along because they're necessarily happier about the removal of basic support prices and don't worry about the nationwide restructuring of the industry.

Dairy farmers can sing along because it may be possible that having music played in the milking parlor, stanchion, or tiestall could actually improve milk production.

Lancaster Farming recently spoke to producers who play music at milking. One thing they all have in common: using music at twice-a-day milking is as much about people comfort as it is cow comfort. And when you keep cow comfort uppermost in your enterprise, studies have shown that translates almost immediately into improved milk quantity and quality.

Espenshade Farm

Red Rose DHIA and Mount Joy Cooperative member Harvey and son Matt Espenshade know how important it is to provide a good working environment for people and cows.

It shows in the type of music Matt plays for his 50 milking cows at the tiestall twice a day.

In the morning it's a talk show over the radio. The cows are used to that.

In the afternoon it's country music. The cows accept that.

There's only two types of music the cows would probably dislike, noted Matt. "We wouldn't play alternative or new age rock," said Matt. "And I think rap music would make them dry up."

Together with father Harvey and mother Sue, Matt Espenshade, 23, studied a lot about dairying at Penn State, where he was graduated in the spring of 1995 with a bachelor's in dairy and animal science. He helps care for the Elizabethtown-based home farm's 140 acres, bringing the total tillable acres to 220, including rented land. The land includes corn and hay in addition to about 30 acres of pasture. Matt helps feed and milk a Holstein herd that is half registered and half grade.

When he's not adjusting the dialer on the portable "boom box" stereo used to play music in the barn, Matt's busy learning how to operate the new milk pipeline installed in November last year. The pipeline is attached to an 800-gallon tank. In addition to music, he attributes the milk production, steadily increasing 100 pounds per month, to a new TMR mixer installed in January this year. The pipeline has a milk yield indicator for each cow, which helps the farm keep even closer



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Because of the number of cows in the herd, dividing into groups for feeding was impractical to the Espenshades. Normally the cows would receive additional vitamins and minerals in a topdress. However, because it can be sometimes difficult to give the protein and energy according to the lactation of the different cows, individual feed stalls were set up with computer-controlled release mechanisms that provide portions four times a day. The cow simply steps into a stall and a neck tag on each cow uses a computer chip to activate the feeder. There are three stalls in use with space for a fourth one if needed.

Already several cows have milk production over the 21,000-pound range. Their top producer is April, with an A rating, projected at 21,700 pounds. Four cows are producing steadily just under 21,000 pounds — Matt noted it used to be rare to make 20,000 pounds for any cow in his herd.

Months ago, before the pipeline was installed, Matt remembers it would take about 2½ hours to milk the herd. Forty-five minutes have been shaved off with the installation of the pipeline for each milking.

As for the music — in the morning Matt listens to WSBA AM 910 talk radio broadcast from York with the "Ralph Lockwood" show. In the afternoon the cows perk up over a country music station, Z107 FM from Hershey, with its broadcast tower in Elizabethtown.

Matt himself also likes to listen to station 105.7 FM "The Edge" in his truck. Only trouble is, Matt noted his reluctance to play alternative rock to the cows since he considers it "abrasive." Matt believes that the music has an inspirational effect on him, like many listeners, where he enjoys it so much that he becomes high-strung.

"I don't want to act aggressive around the cows," he said. "You should be passive around them."

Matt's sister Amy, 21, who also served as Lancaster County dairy



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Overall, Matt continues to improve the genetics on the herd — his favorite part of the enterprise. He sits at the controls of the computer feeder.

princess, worked on a class science project in junior high that studied the use of music during milking. Cows, in her study, positively responded to music. Amy was able to measure the milk receipts and found out that "cows like rock music over no music or country," said Matt. "They'd rather have no music than country."

Matt chuckled when he said, "For Amy, the project was very biased."

But Matt has found that the type

of music has to be selected carefully.

"Alternative music may make the cows act up or act a little too harshly," he said. Normally they won't pay much attention to what's going on, including movement around them, as long as the music they are used to listening to is on. They have come to expect some type of music during each milking.

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