

Franklin County Dairy Uses Technology To Max Bottom Line

JAYNE SEBRIGHT
Lancaster Farming Staff
MERCERSBURG (Franklin Co.) — Computers, good ventilation, and sound management help the Hissongs maximize the bottom line on their 235-cow dairy in Mercersburg.

Father Ron and his sons, Rick and Rod, work to maximize production and minimize labor on their dairy through using computer technology to detect heats, monitor milk records, and manage farm records.

With a rolling herd average of 24,750 pounds milk, 805 pounds fat, and 766 pounds protein, the Hissongs share management responsibilities on the farm.

"My dad takes care of the calves and handles the shop work, while Rod and I share the herd management responsibilities," said Rick. "Rod does most of the employee management and reviews, while I do more of the purchasing and contracting of feeds."

The Hissong's dairy operation celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. In 1949, Ron's father Glen purchased the farm. Ron and Glen formed a partnership in the early 1970's until Ron took the farm over in the early 1980's. Last year Rick and Rod incorporated with the father to form Mercer Vu Farms, Inc.

One of the most interesting innovations the Hissongs use on their farm is a computer system that detects heats in their dairy animals. Using transmitters that are mounted with pouches on the cow's rump, the Heat Watch system indicates when cows come into heat.

The transmitters are put on the cows at about 45 to 50 days in milk. Then the Hissongs wait for the animal to come into heat. Every day they check the standing heat list on the computer and see who needs bred that day.

"I used to get really disgusted spending 20 minutes two or three times a day monitoring heats and not seeing anything," said Rick. "When we got the Heat Watch system, we didn't need to spend that time watching heats. That's a labor cost savings."

According to Rick, the initial cost of the Heat Watch system was about \$6,000 for their 145-cow herd. Each transmitter costs \$55, and you need enough transmitters for about half of your herd. A farmer also needs to purchase the software to record the data.

Once the Hissongs started using Heat Watch, they immediately saw significant cost savings. "The nicest thing about the

program was that our days open decreased 30 days and our days in milk dropped by 60 when we first started using it," said Rick.

The Hissongs also use the Surge Parlor Manager software to monitor milk records and Lancaster County DHIA's PC Dart Program to manage their herd records.

"The system helps you monitor everything from when to trim the cow's feet to when to dry her off," said Rick.

Using Heat Watch and the PC Dart programs, the Hissongs are currently doing a study to determine the best time to breed cattle.

"When we put the information into the computer, we enter in how long after the first mount she is bred," explained Rick. "Our most optimal time seems to be between eight and 15 hours after the first mount."

The computer prevents the Hissongs from having to invest more in time and labor.

"When we expanded, our goal was to go from 140 cows to 230 cows and not add any labor," said Rick. "With the help of the different computer packages we use, that's what we did."

Milking three times a day, the Hissongs have three full-time milkers. Each milker works one shift each weekday and milks a double shift every other weekend. The milking shifts normally take around five hours. Each milking requires only one person to run the parlor and move cows. That frees up the Hissongs to manage the herd, handle the feeding, and take care of any problems.

To improve milk quality and guarantee dependable employees, the Hissongs do regular employee evaluations and offer both quality and attendance premiums to their employees.

The Hissongs also have a new naturally ventilated free stall barn that they feel helps them keep production up during the hot summer months. The barn was built three years ago when they decided to expand the herd to 230 cows.

"In the old barn we used to see anywhere from a 15 to 20-pound drop in production during the summer months," said Rick. "In the new barn, our herd drops only about five to seven pounds in the summer."

The key to natural ventilation, according to the Hissongs, is the sight location of the barn. "If your barns going to see down in a valley, it's probably not the best place to build a naturally ventilated barn," said Rick.

The Hissong's farm is located on a hill, so the barn has a nice

breeze going through it most days. The building has 14-foot sidewall openings and a 38-inch high by 38-inch wide "chimney" or open ridge roof.

"Of course, you're always going to have those hot summer days when there is no breeze going. But, if I had it to do over again, I would build it the exact same way," said Rick. "When you walk into that barn, you don't smell a dairy barn — just fresh air."

The free stall barn was built to allow for future expansion, which the Hissongs plan to do in the next three to four years. Currently milking their herd in a double-eight herringbone parlor, they're already at the maximum herd size that is ideal for that size parlor.

"Right now we're contemplating what our next step will be and how those pieces will fit together," said Rick. "Ideally we would like to build a new parlor suited for 600 cows because that's what it is going to take to make the expansion cash flow."

With the parlor comes another free stall barn plus a special needs area and a freshening area for the herd.

"When we look into the future, our goal with the new set up is that this farm will send a tractor-trailer load of milk to market every day," Rick said. "That kind of volume gives you a lot of power over how and to whom your milk is marketed."

The Hissongs currently run two groups in their herd. They feed a TMR ration formulated for each group. The high group's ration is formulated for 90 pounds of milk, while the low group gets a 70-pound mix.

They use home-grown forages and mostly homegrown high moisture corn, although the drought prevented them from growing enough this year. They purchase other ingredients in the TMR, and they depend on a local nutritionist to formulate the rations.

The forages and high moisture corn are grown on the Hissong's 700-acre farm. Currently they have about 400 acres of corn, 100 acres of beans, and 150 acres of alfalfa.

The Hissongs currently raise all of their replacements, which include about 174 heifers right now. However, after the new Agway heifer replacement system opens up in Shippensburg, they plan to send all of their replacements to that facility.

Rick started working on the dairy after he graduated from Penn State with a major in Agricultural Systems Management & Technology in 1993. Rod joined his father and brother in 1998,

after graduating from Penn State with a major in Dairy and Animal Science.

Ron's wife Judy also helps out on the farm by keeping the financial records and handling the time cards. Rick is married to Becky and has two children, Ryan, who is three years old, and Rachel, who is about a month and a half. All of the Hissongs are actively involved in their local church, the First United Methodist Church of

Mercersburg.

In 1999, the Hissongs hosted Franklin County Fall Farm Fun Fest, which they enjoyed doing.

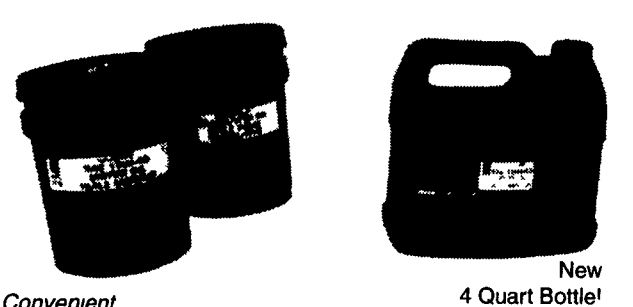
"It was a great experience, and we got a lot of nice compliments on it," said Rick. "We enjoy showing people what farming is all about. With less than two percent involved in agriculture, it's important to educate people about how a working dairy farm is run."



Using Heat Watch, PC Dart, and Surge Parlor Manager software, both Rod and Rick rely heavily on the computer to keep them updated on the herd.

Use **ORIGINAL**
Massey Ferguson Lubricants
For All Of Your Equipment!

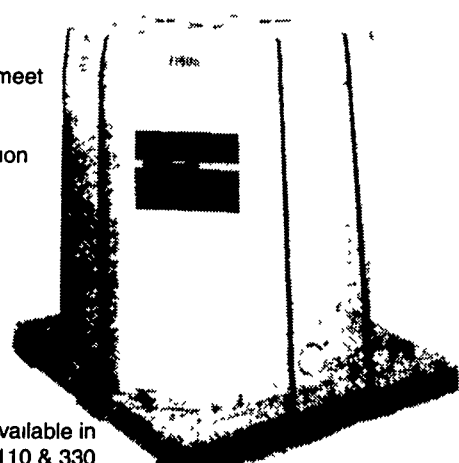
ORIGINAL



Convenient
5 Gallon Bucket

New
4 Quart Bottle!

All formulated to meet the performance requirements on today's low emission engines.



Available in
110 & 330
Gallon Containers!

Go to the Massey Ferguson Dealer below
for great deals on lubricants

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| FIELDS IMPLEMENT STORE
Eighty Four, PA
724-222-1154 | PEOPLES SALES AND SERVICE
Oakland Mills, PA
717-463-2735 | M.M. WEAVER & SONS, INC.
Leola, PA
717-659-2321 |
| MEYER'S IMPLEMENTS, INC.
Greencastle, PA
717-597-2176 | LEBANON VALLEY IMPLEMENTS
Richland, PA
717-866-7518 | LONGENECKER'S, INC.
Williamsburg, PA
814-793-3731 |



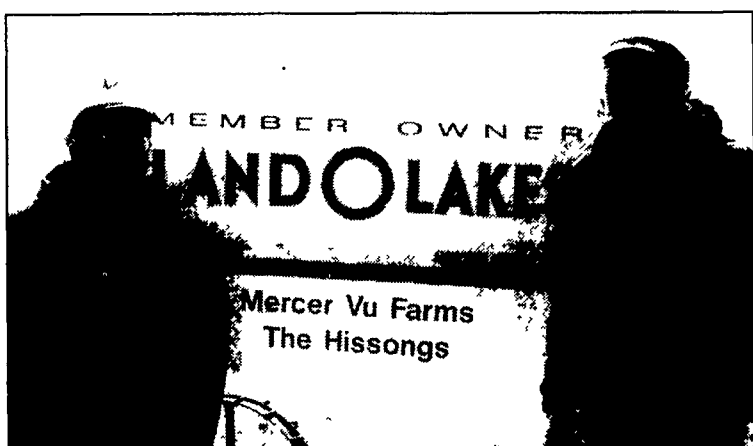
PARTS DIVISION



MASSEY-FERGUSON

PARTners in your success.

Massey Ferguson® is a wholly-owned subsidiary of AGCO Corporation



Rick and Rod Hissong formed a corporation with their father Ron last year. The Hissongs ship their milk to Land O'Lakes, Inc.