

Switch Profitable For Hoppaugh's

(Continued from Page A25)

Hoppaugh.

Every year there are more and more custom operators in the area, so waiting for the harvester hasn't been a problem.

"Even if you're five days later to start, you still have a consistent product. You can put up a couple hundred acres in two days. You have a consistent product from the bottom of your silo to the top, instead of starting on time and ending up in August so you have everything from good to pure trash in the silo. The finishing date is more important sometimes than the starting date," said Ray.

With corn silage in particular, forward contracting lowers the farmer's risk.

"I can sit here today and say okay, my corn silage this fall will cost me \$30 per ton, it's not double jeopardy," said Ray. "On this hill ground, we just can't grow the kind of corn silage that they can on the river flats. We can spend \$200-\$300 per acre to put out corn silage and still have to buy it. Then we've bought two crops in a year. So if we plan to buy it, we know what it's going to cost."

Relying on summer grass is also a time saver for the family.

"Every year I'd drive by these fields with the corn planter and say to myself, 'this grass is ready to be cut,'" said Ray "But it was always a few more weeks before we were able to mow. Now the cows are taking advantage of something I couldn't even harvest with a machine." The cows are on the pasture by the last

week of April and stay out until late October or November, depending on the year.

Over time, the Holsteins that would not graze efficiently were culled and the stalls were filled with registered Ayrshires.

"We thought about Jerseys," said Ray, "But the stalls were too big in the barn. Then someone asked if we had thought about Ayrshires. We tried a few and we really liked them. They knew how to get out in the field and get their nose down instead of looking in the air waiting for when the next wheelbarrow load of silage was coming."

The family milks 115 cows — registered Ayrshires with a few Holsteins sprinkled in — in an 84-unit tiestall barn with a pipeline.

"It takes about an hour and 45 minutes to milk," said Danny. The cows receive what the Hoppaugh's refer to as "TMR light" in the barn in the summer and Danny top dresses with grain in the barn.

In the winter, the ration shifts to include more stored forages and silage.

Danny and Joann do the bulk of the farm work while Ray is "on the road" as a nutritionist. They also employ two high school girls to help with evening milking. Danny's cousin, who also owns some of the animals in the herd, helps milk in the mornings, but they agree that some of their best help has four legs and fur.

"I decided we needed a dog to get with the cows," said Ray. So soon "Chicklet" became a part of the Hoppaugh family.

"Even as a puppy on a leash, she knew what to do," said Ray.

Now the family keeps three heelers and a "faux retriever," Ray said.

"A faux retriever happens to be a chocolate lab who thinks she's a retriever," said Ray. "She sees the heelers doing it and she thinks she needs to do that too. The dogs make all the difference. I don't know how you'd do grazing without having a good dog."

Is it profitable to stay in the dairy business? The Hoppaugh's echo a resounding "yes," but add that a farmer must be willing to make changes that fit his operation.

"You have to decide what's important to you. Do you want to be in business because you really like to be in business and you'd like to make some money, or do you want to perpetuate something that's worthless?" said Ray. "We have decided to stay with the registered Ayrshires because we think there's a future in that."

The Hoppaugh's continue to use top sires and utilize animal analysis tools.

Joann is the main calf manager, starting baby calves on bottles of milk replacer and weaning them at 30 days of age. Calves are born year-round.

All animals are identified for leukosis and the Hoppaugh's are proud to have a Johnes free herd.

They admit that their herd average is lower on grass, but the income over feed cost on a per cow is the same now as it was be-

fore. They ship about 6,000 pounds of milk a day, with a cull rate under 20 percent and fewer expenses.

"The financial end of it changes a lot, said Joann. "I like (grazing) just from a bill paying standpoint." Joann noted that the electricity charges were lower, the feed bill diminishes, and the cost of bedding drops in a grazing system.

"Initially, when we first made the swap from stabling to grass, we saved about \$600 per month in electric alone," said Ray.

But managing the pastures can be tricky in a drought year.

"Last year was the first year in all the years that we've grazed that we actually ran out of pasture completely. Every other year, we've been able to modulate it to the point where we didn't have a lot, but we could keep the cows going and supplement in the barn," said Ray. "Last year we were out for about six weeks and fed baleage." Hoppaugh disputes the conventional wisdom that says to stay competitive, dairymen must expand or be left by the wayside.

"There are a lot of people with 40-cow dairies who are doing okay," he said. "They're real happy with what they're doing and get a chance to turkey hunt and they like their lifestyle. Why should that person milk 400 cows? Just because his neighbor does?"

"What I'm saying is that if you want to expand, you should do it for the right reasons. Don't do it for an ego trip. If you're doing it for the right reasons and have the right facilities and the right area

and the right complement of things to go with it, I have nothing against it."

Joann added that farmers must be vocal and active in promoting their business.

"We live in an agricultural area, but people don't understand what goes on. I think you have to make phone calls to senators and representatives and stay attentive to what's going on," said Joann.

The Hoppaugh's are also firm believers that agriculture needs to be prominent in the economic picture.

"With the whole infrastructure of the economy, agriculture carries so much weight," said Ray. "If (agriculture) is not perpetuated in some kind of economic fashion that's feasible, what's going to happen to this ground?"

For now, the Hoppaugh's are content watching their herd move across the paddocks of green grass and are thoroughly enjoying the benefits of grazing.

"It's more simplistic than you think. If you're going to go to grazing, you haven't changed Bossy's requirements," Ray said. "It's just that you're trying to provide for them from a different and more economical source - something that hasn't been touched with our tractors and diesel fuel and things like that. And, if you're maintaining your pastures and managing them properly, they're definitely better quality than you can harvest and store, so you use that and take advantage of that. But, if it's not available outside, you must provide it in the barn."

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