

SPOTLIGHT ON ALUMNI

Putting education, experiences into practice *Becks welcome next generation to the dairy farm*

By Missy Mussman

PRINCETON, Minn. - After four years of college and three years as a herdsman at a 3,600-cow dairy farm, Pete Beck was ready to return to his home farm.

"I had always intended to come back. That was my plan," he said. "I had the opportunity to take everything I learned and experienced and put it into practice at home."

For the past four years, Pete (28) has been milking 118 cows in a double-6 herringbone parlor with his father, Jim, on their dairy farm in Mille Lacs County near Princeton, Minn.

Although Pete was ready to come back to the 68-cow dairy farm in August of 2010, he wanted to make sure there was a positive transition into the farm.

"The question for me was how were we going to do this and how were we going to make it work," Pete said.

His degree in dairy science from South Dakota State University and his experience working at Prairie Gold Dairy near Elkton, S.D. came in handy for that.

"With all the education and experiences I have had, if I didn't use either, it would be a waste," Pete said. "I decided to focus on the cows."

Jim also realized the value of his son's education and experiences.

"Since he was able to work with that many cows, he picked up on and learned a lot," Jim said. "Having him work with the cows was a no brainer."

Pete utilized those experiences right away starting with the transition cows.

In 2010, the dry cows were housed in a small shed built in 2006. Prior to that, they were housed with the milking herd.

"I wanted to tackle that first," Pete said. "We aggressively worked to change it. We needed to alter that."

Right off the bat he notice there was a lack of bunk space, so they bought a few portable feed bunks, which increased the feed bunk space to 30 inches per cow.

"We made big strides with the dry cows by doing just that," Pete said.

Jim also saw those improvements.

"It made a world of difference," he said. "We were trying to feed them with the bunks we had, and it wasn't working."

However, Pete realized they still needed more room for the dry cows.

"We had no ability to separate the transition cows into groups



The dry cows are housed in a new barn that was built this past July. Pete has been working with Jim on improving the transition cows for the past four years. PHOTO BY MISSY MUSSMAN



Pete (left) and Jim Beck check the cows for heats on Oct. 29. Pete worked with Jim to improve their reproductive program after returning to the farm full-time. PHOTO BY MISSY MUSSMAN

with the old facility," Pete said. "We needed more space."

They would have to build a new facility, but they waited until this past July, when they built an 80 by 42-foot dry cow barn.

"For the first 2.5 years, I tried to make changes that didn't require us to spend a lot of money," Pete said. "We made small changes first. I looked at the financial aspect before we made a decision."

When it came to making those decisions, Pete didn't do it alone.

"Dad and I would talk each decision through before it would get done," Pete said. "We didn't always agree on everything,

but when we didn't, I would justify the change and why it was important for our farm."

The next area Pete focused on was the herd health and reproductive program.

"The first thing we did was get back on consistent vet checks to get the reproduction under control," Pete said.

He also implemented a timed A.I. program.

"We used it as a tool when needed," Pete said.

Currently, when the vet comes, they have up to 90 percent pregnancies.

"It wasn't poor before, but we were no where near where we are now," Jim said.

Pete also had a lot to offer with the herd health.

"When I worked at Prairie Gold Dairy, I was able to have the vets teach me how to do things," Pete said. "I can do almost everything except surgery, but I can fix a prolapsed uterus myself. That has saved us money."

Within the first two months of returning home, the Becks had a cow with a torsioned uterus.

"Usually you would externally twist it, but a vet had taught me to put a 2 by 8-foot board on her side - the same side the uterus is on - and stand on it while he flipped the cow. The uterus would untwist itself," Pete said. "We did that here and it worked."

Jim was impressed.

"He picked up some neat birthing tricks we use now," he said. "He's even taught our vets some things."

Pete now uses his observation skills to catch sick cows earlier and does all the postpartum and full exams and takes care of the hoof health.

"I just want to make sure the cows are healthy and stay healthy," Pete said. "I wanted to get a good handle on visually identifying heats and sick cows, to help cows breed back faster or come out of illnesses faster."

Nutrition is another area Pete has worked with.

"The main thing we changed was the timing we take the forages off the fields to improve feed quality," Pete said. "Since doing that, production has improved. Since November 2010, average milk has increased by about 6,000 pounds per cow, per lactation."

To help improve records with the cows, Pete started using PC Dart in 2011.

"It streamlined everything," Pete said. "It is easy for us to look up and track everything from heats to where cows are in their lactations."

He has since installed the Pocket Dairy app on his phone to be able to pull up his PC Dart records there.

"The records are at my finger tips," Pete said.

In 2012, Pete and his wife, Robyn, moved the calves from weaning until seven months of age to their house six miles away. Before then, they were sending the calves to a custom raiser.

"My wife takes care of them while working a full-time job. I couldn't do this without her," Pete said. "We also have our bull calves over there that we feed out to 300 pounds and a flock of ewes she takes care of, too."

Pete worked with his dad to bump up the calves' calorie intake by providing three quarts of milk replacer per day and providing a consistent time for feeding.

"The calves were growing better in the winter after that," Jim said. "Our springing heifers from the first group on the accelerated growth program were 200 pounds bigger than before."

With the herd continuing to grow internally after Pete returned, the Becks needed more room than the 3-row freestall barn with 70 used, sand-bedded stalls they had installed with the used double-6 herringbone parlor in 1997. By 2013, the Becks had built an additional 40-stall sand-bedded freestall barn on the other side of the existing freestall. Pete made sure to include headlocks in both barns.

"The headlocks work really well for herd checks and breeding," Pete said. "I missed those when I came back here because they made things easier. I realized we didn't have a good place to check cows."

Since putting the headlocks in, Jim has found them helpful.

"They are such a time saver," he said. "That was a big improvement for us."

Although there have been many changes already, the Becks are working on updating their parlor by elevating the ceilings and hoping to move to a swing-10 or a double-10 parlor.

"That's our next project," Pete said.

Making these changes is something Pete is proud of.

"I'm proud to look at everything we've done and know that we did it," he said. "The changes we made were for the better. Looking at where we were to where we are now makes me proud."

With all the changes made and his return to the dairy, Pete has seen a spark in Jim.

"This put more energy in Dad," he said. "He's even more excited about what's going on. He's seeing the cows improve and that is invigorating for him."

Jim agreed.

"He has put more energy in me," Jim said. "Having him back makes me really proud. It's what I worked for - to have the next generation come back."