

2014 Winter Traveling Dairy Tour

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Every January, students from several New England universities spend a week touring dairy farms on a trip known as the Winter Traveling Dairy Tour. This year was the 17th consecutive year of the tour. Graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Massachusetts, University of Maine, University of Connecticut, and University of New Hampshire traveled to dairy facilities in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. This was made possible by the detailed planning of Dr. Shelia Andrews from the University of Connecticut, the support of Dr. Peter Erickson from the University of New Hampshire, Dr. David Marcinkowski from the University of Maine, Dr. Mark Huyler from the University of Massachusetts, and a very generous grant from the Northeast Farm Credit AgEnhancement Program.

The tour started by gathering at the University of Connecticut's Kellogg Dairy Farm. They milk about one hundred Holstein and Jersey cows three times a day. Students do the third milking, working about twelve hours a week, in exchange for room and board near the farm. Also featured is a research wing with a modern For-Most squeeze chute that can rotate on a horizontal axis. There are currently ten acres available for rotational grazing. The dairy would like to expand, but available land is usually reserved for academic buildings, residential halls, or parking lots. UConn's Kellogg Farm won multiple awards in 2013, including the AgriMark Top Quality Award in the Region and the Gold Winner in the National Dairy Quality Awards Program of the National Mastitis Council. The success can be tasted in their delicious ice cream that comes in a variety of flavors such as banana chocolate chip and husky tracks!

Next, we headed to Graywall Farm in Lebanon Connecticut, which is run by a father and son. They milk approximately 550 cows in a double 14 parlor, four times a day! This intensive milking schedule sets them apart from the other farms. The utilities are in a separate room resulting in a remarkably quiet milking parlor. The cows seem to appreciate this reduction of stress, since they could be seen chewing their cud and came up to the fence to greet visitors. Robin Chesmer decided not to buy sexed semen because it would rapidly increase his already overcrowded milking herd size. Graywall Farm is a member of "the Farmer's Cow" cooperative that produces over 20% of Connecticut's milk. The Chesmers diversify their farm by making cheese, ice cream, non-dairy beverages (such as ice tea and lemonade) and by operating a lunch counter in a neighboring town. To further augment profits, they grow their own feed and provide custom chop services.

The third farm, Ned Ellis' Maple Leaf Farm in Hebron, Connecticut, is also a member of "the Farmer's Cow". Approximately 170 cows are milked here. Mr. Ellis' implies that it is well worth the work

to obtain a lower somatic cell count, so that the milk can be sold at the highest grade. Each cow is equipped with an activity collar which has improved heat detection. This farm's income is supplemented with a cellphone tower, disguised as a flagpole, and solar panels which provided for 40% of the farm's electrical demand. The cows relax on mattress and sawdust. Since the manure collection is bottom fed, no sand can be used. Along with cornmeal, soybean, and citrus palm, cotton seeds are mixed into the feed. The most intriguing part of this farm was Mr. Ellis' resourcefulness. For example, guardrails are used as feed confines and woodchips are piled over silage to inexpensively prevent spoilage.

As one enters the tie stalls in the Arethusa Farm in Litchfield, Connecticut, a quote accurately portraying its management is seen overhead. It reads "Every cow in this barn is a lady, treat her as such." The 350+ Brown Swiss, Holstein and Jersey cows have clipped udders, debris blown off every day, and their tails are washed twice a day. No cow lies in manure. Over two thirds of the herd is separated as solely show cows. They are given a different diet and access to eight pastures for exercise. Milking cows will soon be able to enjoy an indoor exercise arena when weather is disagreeable. Two convenient features of this farm include a track feeder and maternity pens that have gaps in the sides big enough for only a person to walk through. This way a herdsman can walk through all the pens without having to fuss with gates. Our tour guide, Matt Senecal, admits that this type of dairy farming is not self-sustaining but rather is a means of public education.

The second farm on the second day was run by two brothers, Christopher and Todd Hannan and was based in Woodbury, Connecticut. The farm is operated on scattered plots of rented land, which wears on equipment and adds traveling time. Fifty percent of the farm's profit comes from making hay, which greatly alters the approach to providing bedding for the cows. The thirty five Holstein cows, one third of which are red and white, are bedded on indigestible corn stalk. The Hannan brothers instill a vision of modern pioneers. They face 21st century problems of decreased availability of farm land and the dilemma of building facilities on rented land. These men persevere because they are innovative; they use new techniques and aren't afraid to just "wing it" every once and a while.

The herd management at the Abbey of Saint Regina Laudis located in Bethlehem, Connecticut provided a refreshing juxtaposition to the other dairies. Five cows are milked, by hand, twice a day. This milk is served raw at the convent dinner table. The rest of the milk is used to make a wide variety of cheeses. The nuns did not start out as farmers, but they enjoy using their advanced academic degrees to preserve traditional techniques. The Belted Galloways and Milking Shorthorns remain astonishingly sanitary resting on packed bedding. Two young Holstein steers are being trained to ceremoniously pull a wagon hearse for the Regina Laudis sisters.

On the third day we visited two neighboring farms, the first was Freund's Farm in North Canaan, Connecticut. This farm is located near a stream, so Mr. Freund is careful to maintain buffer zones between the livestock and the water source. The most profitable part of the farm is the CowPots manufacturing. CowPots are seed starter pots made from composted manure. However only 10% of the manure produced from his 265 Holsteins can be used in the "CowPots". The rest is liquid and is spread on his fields. Consistency is important in his products, so paper is incorporated to level out the changes in manure consistency. When not producing material for the "cow pots", the cows are milked in a double 10 parlor inside a greenhouse. This allows for more light and ventilation.

The second largest dairy on the tour was Laurelbrook Farm also in North Canaan, Connecticut. Laurelbrook Farm is owned and operated by the fourth generation of the Jacquier family. Even with a stock of 1,050 lactating cows it was surprising to discover that 27% of the calves had been misidentified when compared to their newly implemented genomic testing. Laurelbrook Farm is concerned about public perceptions, so a Temple Grandin styled corral is utilized and odor is minimized. "Cricket" believes that the absence of flies on the farm is due to docked tails. The strongest testament against overcrowding was presented here. "Cricket" said that one month he sold 35 cows, culled 35 more, and beefed another 35 and there was no dip in milk production. The total milk volume production of the herd stayed at the same level because the remaining cows were less stressed and therefore individually produced more, making up for the loss of 105 producers.

The Coon Brothers' tactic for their farm is to provide excellent feed to their 350 Holstein and Guernsey herd. This way, time that would have been spent on herd management can be spent on tending to their 2,000 acres of hay, corn, and soy crops. In Amenia, New York, they are surrounded by rich, well-educated neighbors that are glad to rent the crop land at a reasonable price. The Guernsey cows produce a higher fat content of 3.9% and are milked in a double 10 parallel parlor which is pooled as "Hudson Valley Fresh".

Tollgate Farm in Ancramdale, New York was started in 1993 and has the lowest milk somatic cell count of the farms we visited. The Davenports' are consistently given the Northeast Dairy Herd Improvement Cooperative High Quality Milk Award, Agrimark Region 1 Top Quality Producer, Agrimark Cooperative Top Quality Herd, NMC National Dairy Quality Award, and the AgriMark Quality Award. This prestige is obtained by 64 Holsteins and Ayrshires in tie stalls, milked by pipeline. The rest of the herd is housed in free stalls on packed bedding and are let out to pasture daily for exercise. A large "Slurry Store" imposes itself against the beautiful mountain background. Tollgate Farm is a member of the "Hudson Valley Fresh" cooperative.

Finally on the last day, we visited the farm everyone had been waiting for, High Lawn Farm located in Lee, Massachusetts. Besides its beautiful clock tower, the major attraction was two robotic milking machines that were installed last September. A barn had to be built around the machines to facilitate the correct flow pattern. The 125 Jersey cows are given a small portion of grain every time they enter, which ends up being about three times a day. If the cow has been milked too recently, the robot will shuttle them through without attaching. There is also a robot to push manure through the slats in the free stall and another to push feed up twice a day. Extended day lighting is used. Since the implementation of the robots, the number of required employees went from eight full-time to three full-time and one part-time employee.

With the largest farm, Bahler Farm in Ellington, Connecticut it is necessary to concentrate on the business side of running a 1,014 calf and 2,000 cow dairy. This fifth generation farm has moved away from the traditional “family farm” structure and formed a board with businessmen, veterinarians, and nutritionists that meet once a month. Vern Bahler believes that it is the finances that get you through to the next generation. He also said that a barn is a barn; it is the people that make the difference. The Bahlers want to put a system in place where the farming help can be hired out and easily trained. Luckily Vern has a young, business-minded nephew, Seth, to assume the role of general manager.

I presented my peers with the question, “Which farm has the happiest cows?” and no student gave the same answer. I chose the cows at the Abbey with more natural methods of management. One student said the High Lawn Farm cows, since they can choose when to be milked. Another said Arethusa Farm since the barn and animals are constantly clean.

There are many ways to run a dairy farm successfully. I am grateful for the opportunity we had to experience and observe some of these techniques. This knowledge will benefit our future endeavors. Thank you once again to the Northeast Farm Credit AgEnhancement Program for funding this enlightening dairy tour.