



Lance & Nancy Johnson

At Silver Sky Dairy, keeping management practices simple is fundamental to make a profit, even if it means doing things different than the average dairy farm.

“We believe in keeping everything simple,” Silver Sky co-owner Lance Johnson says. “Basically, we feed and milk our cows in order to make a profit. We may do it differently than most other farms, but that is the result of us attempting to be more profitable.”

Lance and Nancy Johnson, of Hesperia, are this year’s District 11 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators. Lance owns the Silver Sky Dairy in a 50/50 LLC partnership with his brother-in-law Frank Konkel. Nancy and Frank’s wife, Shari, are employees of the farm.

Most of the dairy’s 280 cows graze on 140 acres of pasture

during the grazing season – May through October.

“Our cows are outside on pasture more than the average farm,” Lance says. “Our main reason for grazing is to save money to keep our labor costs low. Nothing uses less labor than having cows on pasture.”

Instead of adhering to an all grazing or all feed program, the Johnsons rotational graze late lactation and dry cows during the grazing season but feed early lactation and close-up dry cows a TMR year-round.

“We used to graze all of our cows, but early lactation cows suffer more production loss than late lactation cows when grazing,” Lance says.

The close-up dry cows are fed the TMR to give their digestive systems time to adjust to the new diet before freshening.

“We tried a few different systems over the years and after much trial and error this is what we have settled on,” Lance says.

From November-April, all cows are fed a TMR consisting mainly of corn silage and alfalfa that is grown on the 880-acre farm. Before it is stored, corn silage is processed to crush cobs and kernels to make the nutrients more

available to the cows. The cobs are crushed small enough that the cows eat them, reducing the time and labor of cleaning cobs out of the feed bunk.

“Our TMR forages are usually around 50 percent corn silage and 50 percent haylage and hay,” Lance says. “It is stored in up to 12 silos, although many of the older silos are not used every year. Having all those silos allows us to separate feed for different cow groups and produces more consistent quality feed. I like corn silage because of its low labor requirement per ton of feed compared to alfalfa.”

To reduce on-farm labor, Silver Sky has the corn custom sprayed and this year, hired a custom operator to make large square haybales.

“We used to buy the large square bales but wanted to use our own alfalfa,” Lance says. “With our herd size, we can’t afford to buy top of the line equipment, so it makes more sense to have the alfalfa custom harvested.”

Corn and alfalfa are the only crops grown at Silver Sky. To control erosion on the farm’s hilly ground, the Johnsons practice strip farming by alternating corn and alfalfa fields every 120 feet. Corn plots are rotated every 3 years and alfalfa, every 4 years.

"Soil erosion is a problem on hilly ground like ours," Lance says. "Water runs down and forms pools in the low spots. If you have a hayfield every 120 feet, it works better to control erosion."

Soil erosion is not the only challenge Silver Sky has dealt with. When they expanded cow numbers and built a new parlor and freestall barn across the road from the original farm, they eliminated Staph Aureus from the herd.

"We used MMPA's herd testing program to find which cows had Staph Aureus and culled every positive cow," Nancy says. "We screened every animal before moving them across the road because we didn't want to get the bug there."

To keep from reintroducing it into the herd, the Johnsons only bought cows from herds that had individual DHIA SCC records. With the expansion complete, the Johnsons have a closed herd, raise all replacements on the farm and AI breed all cows.

Silver Sky's diligence fighting Staph Aureus has paid off with the herd's SCC staying consistently below 120,000, allowing for MMPA quality premium incentives.

Focusing on quality earned Silver Sky MMPA's Top Quality Award in 1998. The farm takes advantage of MMPA's Milker Training Schools to ensure all employee and family milkers learn proper milking procedures. The Johnsons closely monitor any changes in the herd's milk quality and evaluate individual cows by sending in milk sample specials to the MMPA lab.

"We have our MMPA quality mailers e-mailed to us so we know instantly when anything is getting high," Nancy says.

Keeping cows disease-free is important to the Johnsons, so they began testing the herd for Johne's Disease a few years ago.

"When we first expanded, we bought at least one Johne's infected cow," Lance says. "We currently use AntelBio's Milk ELISA test to screen the cows twice a year."

By testing, removing cows with a high Johne's prevalence and discarding colostrum from suspect cows, Silver Sky has reduced the herd's Johnes incidence down to one percent.

"We can't say we are Johne's free yet, but we hope to be soon," Lance says. "I think it is a good idea for every dairy farmer to test for the disease and have a Johne's program in place."

The Johnsons are members of the Muskegon Local where Nancy serves as a Dairy Communicator. She also serves as the secretary-treasurer for the Old Newyago DHIA. Lance serves on the Michigan Hay and Grazing Council board and is a NorthStar delegate. The couple is involved in their church where Nancy is a youth

director and Lance is a Deacon.

Nancy stresses that every dairy farmer is a dairy communicator and believes that all dairy families should make efforts to communicate a positive image of the dairy industry. This summer, she volunteered to help run the local Farm Bureau cheese booth at the Newaygo County Fair.

"We sold nearly 4,000 milk chugs during the week of the fair," Nancy says. "Our kids helped out and we all had fun doing it."

The Johnson's children, Luke, 7 and Kara, 6, showed dairy calves, horses and entered still exhibits at the fair this year.



The Johnson Family: Lance, Nancy, Luke and Kara, in one of the farm's many pastures.

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