



Dale & Wendy Fisk

Four years ago, District 10 FOYDC Dale and Wendy Fisk rarely saw each other, much less spent time working together at home. The couple decided to completely change their lifestyle when they heard about a dairy farm in their area that might be available.

The Fisks contacted the farm owner and arranged to lease the Sterling area farm with the option to buy or back out of the agreement completely.

"We figured we weren't out anything if we gave it a shot," Wendy says.

The couple went to work right away securing financing from FSA to purchase cows and milking equipment.

"We had to do piles and piles of paperwork for the FSA loan," Wendy says.

Once the financing came through, Dale and Wendy bought 30 milk cows, 15 bred heifers and 10 bred cull cows from farms in the area to start their herd. Today, the couple milks 45 cows.

"There was nothing wrong

with the cull cows, they were just older cows and the farmer had new replacements," Dale says.

The farm had a parlor and a bulk tank, but the actual milking equipment had been sold years before when the previous owners got out of the dairy business.

"We found a used parlor setup in the thumb area and retrofitted it for our parlor," Dale says.

At the time, Dale worked for a local dairy farm and Wendy worked at Target in Bay City. Dale quit his job first, focusing all of his efforts on the couple's new dairy.

"I liked the farm I worked for," Dale says. "They paid me well and paid for my insurance. But we wanted to have our own farm."

In November 2003, Wendy quit her job to work full-time on the farm.

"People told us we couldn't survive milking only 45 cows," Wendy says. "We took a chance and it has worked out well."

Dale and Wendy advise anyone wanting their own dairy farm to go ahead and give it a try.

"You will never know if you can do it if you don't try," Dale adds. "If you are doing a good job working for someone else, you will definitely do a good job working for yourself."

After working many years off the farm, the Fisks say they enjoy the benefits of working for themselves. They get along well and enjoy working together, love the short "commute" from the house to the barn and appreciate the extra time spent with their kids.

"We have to work anyway, so why not do it for ourselves?" Wendy says. "I couldn't imagine working for anyone else now. No day is ever the same and we have fun working together."

The couple's four children, Briar, 13, Joni, 11, Autumn, 10 and Caitlyn, 6, help their parents on the farm, mainly with calf feeding. Briar also helps feed the cows and bed pens. Caitlyn loves being with the cows and volunteers to bring them in for evening milkings.

Caitlyn's love of being around the cows and an incident Dale had with a bull a couple years ago prompted the Fisks to stop using

a bull and start breeding the herd 100 percent AI. For safety reasons, no bull is allowed on the farm and bull calves are sold at 3 weeks old.

"It is too scary to have a bull here with all the kids," Dale says. "Especially since Caitlyn helps bring the cows in. When we had a bull I was the only one who could bring the cows in."

A vet comes out every two months to help Dale pregnancy check the cows. Successful breeding has not been a problem for the Fisks, considering their heifer replacements have been plentiful enough that no cattle have been purchased in over 2 years. They currently have 85 heifers and plan to sell some heifers or cows soon to maintain the herd size at 45.

"We joke that we have too many heifers," Dale says. "It is not a bad thing, if we keep going like this the herd will stay young and that's good."

Doing the work themselves, producing a quality product and keeping costs low help the Fisks live comfortably with 45 cows.

"We want to stay about that size," Dale says. "We would have to hire someone to help if we had more cows. Plus, our facilities are set up for the number of cows we have now. If we expanded the herd we would have to expand everything."

While Dale and Wendy have no plans for expansion, they do plan to update and improve their facilities. Currently the cows are housed in sand-bedded freestalls, but are fed in bunks outside on a concrete lot.

"The cows are in freestalls now, but it is an old building," Dale says. "We really need a new freestall barn where we can feed and house the cows under the same roof."

Most of the cows' feed – corn and hay – is grown on 140 acres

leased by the Fisks. Dale performs the majority of the fieldwork with some help from his father, Hubert Fisk. The cows are fed a TMR of haylage, corn silage, dry corn, dry hay and protein supplements.

Dale works with a nutritionist to fine-tune the rations, but does not push the cows to have high milk production. Having comfortable, healthy cows that produce high quality milk is more important to the Fisks than high production.

"The herd is not pushed for production," Dale says. "We have very little cow trouble health wise."

Even with no prior farm experience, Wendy took on the job of primary milker when the Fisks decided to start their dairy. With help from Dale, she learned by performing both daily milkings. Her skills got a boost when the couple attended an MMPA Milker Training School in February 2001.



"After we took the class, our SCC went down dramatically," Wendy says. "I learned a lot more there than I ever expected and now we are very consistent in our milking routine. Our production has gone up and our SCC has gone down."

In 2002, Dale and Wendy received a silver award and this year, will receive a bronze award for milk quality from MMPA.

"That was a very worthwhile class," Dale says. "It doesn't cost anything, so I don't know why producers wouldn't go."



The Fisk family: Joni, Briar, Dale, Autum, Wendy and Caitlyn.