



Steve & Lisa Alexander

Quality milk, quality genetics and good production are the management principles Steve Alexander uses when deciding what cows will remain on his dairy.

"I strive for high quality, high production cows, so I cull heavily," Steve says.

Steve and his wife, Lisa, are this year's District 8 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators. The couple farm 250 acres and milk 55 cows on their Carsonville area dairy farm.

Over the past 5 years, Steve has dropped the herd's somatic cell count by about 150,000 SCC and increased the herd's rolling average by nearly 4,000 pounds of milk. Steve achieved the improvements by culling heavily, keeping only the cows that had strong production and low SCC. Those management practices have earned the herd a spot in the Top 25 DHIA Herds in Sanilac County for five years running.

"We use high cull rate because if they don't produce at the level Steve wants, its not cost effective to feed them," Lisa says.

"If I can feed one cow the same feed and get a lot more milk out of her, why keep the one that doesn't produce as well?" Steve asks.

Steve culls heavily to keep herd genetics strong. He prefers to raise and keep heifer and bull calves from high producing dams so he can continually improve the herd's genetics. Steve raises and sells breeding bulls that come out of good producing cows.

When the Alexander's custom heifer raiser retired a few years ago, Steve decided to raise and breed the heifers on the farm.

"It has created a lot more work for me, but it has been working out really well," Steve says.

Heifers are bred with a bull since Steve's facility is not set up to artificially inseminate young heifers. Cows are A.I. bred with

semen from bulls that will continue to improve herd genetics. Steve also works to keep 25-30 percent of the herd Red and White Holstein, his favorite breed.

"I like the old Red and Whites over the black and whites," Steve says.

Contrary to popular opinion, Steve has not found a production difference between the two differently colored Holstein breeds on his farm.

"I have Red and Whites that will milk just as good as any black and whites," he explains.

A portion of the herd is registered and Steve intends to keep registration up to date on new arrivals, but has found it a bit challenging to keep up with the paperwork and focus on his day-to-day farm responsibilities.

"When we decided to start our own operation, Steve's goal was to run the operation by himself without a lot of outside help," Lisa says.

Today, Steve has one part time employee, a local high school student who helps with evening milkings and calf chores after school as well as one milking on the weekends. The farm's set up with holding pens and a double 6 herringbone parlor lets Steve perform morning and most weekend milkings by himself.

By doing a majority of the farm work himself, Steve knows duties are being performed the way he wants, something that is very important when managing the prevalence of Johne's Disease in the herd. With quality milk and good management practices, Steve says it wasn't hard to implement Johne's testing into the operation.

"The herd's Johne's rate is low," Steve says, "We have been testing the herd for over 4 years. You've got to manage the disease all the time, because one year they can be negative and the next year they show up positive."

Freshening pens are kept clean and colostrum from Johne's negative cows is fed only to their calf. Other than that, no other milk is ever fed to the calves. Colostrum from the rare few Johne's positive cows that Steve doesn't cull is never fed to their calves.

"I generally cull if the cow is positive but I have one or two exceptions," Steve says.

Steve has been performing Johne's tests on the herd for quite some time. The Alexanders believe the disease came through some purchased cows, which taught them to be much more selective when bringing new cows into the herd.

"We now buy cows only from DHIA and Johne's tested herds that we can look at the records before we buy the animals," Lisa says.

For the most part, operations on the farm run smoothly, but this summer, there were a few bumps in the road when the cows' production began to drop, SCC began to rise and the cows' started having various health problems.

"We encountered a problem in late summer with toxins in silage from one corn field," Steve says. "The cows got sick on last year's silage which caused a breeding problem."

Once Steve and the farm's nutritionist narrowed down the cause to the silage and stopped feeding it to the cows, their health and breeding rates improved. With the amount of calves that are currently due and have arrived, Steve will be able to maintain his desired herd of 50-70 cows while continuing at his current cull rate.

Lisa handles all the financial aspects of the operation and helps out with calf feeding when time allows. She is kept busy with the couple's three daughters', Jordan, 15, Brooke, 12, and Cynthia, 8, ac-

tivity schedules as well as her own career as a lender at Exchange State Bank in Carsonville. The girls also help out on the farm, but stay quite busy with extracurricular activities at school and 4-H projects.

In the future, the Alexanders plan to expand the operation by 30-40 cows, which would justify hiring one full time employee. They could add that number of cows without making major changes to the farm's current facility.

Steve and Lisa are members of the MMPA Southern Sanilac Local where Steve has served as a delegate for many years. He also serves on the MMPA Credentials Committee. The farm has earned two awards for achieving 100 percent Grade A Surveys and earned a MMPA Bronze Quality Award in 2004. Lisa is a Sanilac County Dairy Committee Member and 4-H Club project leader. The Alexanders are both active in their daughters' high school athletic booster club.



The Alexander family, from left: Brooke, Steve, Lisa, Cynthia and Jordan.