



Steve & Danielle Berens

District 11 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators Steve and Danielle Berens had been considering installing a manure pit on the 155-cow, 380 acre dairy they farm in partnership with Danielle's parents, Darwin and Doris Huff. That decision was made easier when Danielle's brother, Dwayne, also a partner in the Wayland, Mich. dairy, told the family he no longer wanted to farm.

"We put in the manure pit so we didn't have to haul manure every day," Steve says. "It was in the works, but when he said he was leaving, we definitely decided to put the pit in because we knew we would need the extra time."

Dwayne's departure, which was amicable, began a variety of changes for the farm partners. One less person doing the farm work meant they would have to either work more hours or look into hiring additional help.

"We had to make decisions on how to deal with labor," Danielle said. "That's when we hired Steve's brother Randy and another employee, Erin." Randy works full time on the farm and Erin, now a student at MSU, works on the weekends and performs morning milkings in the summer.

Steve, who mainly concentrated on the cropping and equipment portions of the operation, learned more about the cows when he took over Dwayne's role as herdsman.

"That was a big change for me, he did all of the cow stuff and I didn't do any of it," Steve says. "That was a big learning experience for me. Now Randy does a lot of it with me overseeing."

The changes also caused the remaining farm partners to incorporate time saving practices in several areas of the farm, from feeding, to milking, to manure handling. Steve now feeds the cows in the morning only.

"I feed the cows once a day instead of two," Steve says. "I feed them twice as much in the morning and scrape during the day. It lets me spend more time managing the cows."

Time spent in the parlor was reduced greatly when the Berenses and Huffs decided to add additional milking units to the parlor. They now milk in a double-six step up/step through parlor. On a good day, Steve estimates cow through put at 70 cows per hour with the current system.

"We upgraded the system about a year and a half ago and added four more units, put in auto washers, a new vacuum pump and new electrical," Danielle says. "The additional milkers really make a big difference."

"It is a big time saver," Steve agrees. "You would spend so much time in the parlor that there wasn't much time to spend in the fields. Now you can get the milking done and have most of the day left."

Installing the manure pit has saved time and many headaches for Steve. Before, the farm was a daily scrape and haul operation. Now, the pit can hold 6 months of storage, allowing Steve to decide when he wants to spread.

"Now we can pick decent weather to haul in for the fields, it is much better," Steve says. "Now we don't have to haul on rainy days, etc."

Steve likes to empty the pit in mid-April before corn planting and again in October, once the corn is harvested. They own and share some manure handling equipment with another dairy farm in the area, varying times that each farm empties their manure pits.

"We have one tank spreader and rent or borrow one so we can have two going at a time," Steve says. "Manure is spread on top of the fields and then we incorporate it into the soil. We have tested our manure for nutrient levels, calibrated our spreader and tested our soil so that we can spread at the correct rate."

A manure management plan for the farm was completed last summer, something that was made easier because Steve had already been pulling soil and manure samples.

"It wasn't that big of a job," Steve says. "We soil sampled already, so we didn't change anything, we just have records now on what we are doing."

The farm's 380 acres is a bit small to handle the manure from cows, calves and heifers, so heifers are custom raised by a brother-in-law, Ron Veenstra. He also buys the farm's bull calves.

Ron grows the crops for the heifers' feed, but Steve and Danielle harvest the feed.

"We started having the heifers custom raised because we didn't have enough feed, acres or buildings," Danielle says. "We take them when they are 8-10 weeks old, supply a bull and bring them home when they are springers."

Steve and Danielle are pleased with the time-saving management practices they now use on the farm. The couple says it gives them more time to spend with their children, Heather, 9 and Justin, 6.

"It also gives us more time to get away," Danielle says. During the summer, the family takes short camping trips.

Steve and Danielle are members of the West Michigan Local, where Steve has served as a delegate. He also serves on the county Farm Bureau Young Farmers Committee. Both are 4-H leaders for a number of clubs in the community.



The Berens family, from left: Danielle, Justin, Steve and Heather.