



Scott & Liz Bontekoe

Dairy producers are among the few in the Ag community who have a monthly cash flow. Through careful planning and conservative spending, it can allow them to literally own their farms and live nearly debt free. Six generations of the Bontekoe family, of Howell, have chosen to farm this way, including the 2005 District 7 OYDCs Scott and Liz Bontekoe.

“We are a very frugal family,” Scott says. “My grandparents and parents have a policy that we almost never borrow money, and that’s the way we run the farm today.”

Scott farms in partnership with his father, Steve, on the family’s 800 acre farm in Livingston County. His grandfather, Jake, lives on the farm and still works on the 150 cow dairy with the younger Bontekoes nearly every day.

The family’s money borrowing policy was nearly tested two years ago when a tractor and

freestall barn caught fire. The family was able to save the cows, but the tractor and the majority of the 110 stall barn were a complete loss. Quick actions by the family, 5-6 area fire departments and 110,000 gallons of water kept the fire contained to the freestall barn.

“We were fortunate with our fire in comparison to other people who have been completely wiped out – parlor and all – and that put them out of business,” Scott says. “The freestall barn is right in the center of the farm and the fire could have taken the whole place down.”

With only 25 stalls remaining in an adjacent barn, and no other covered area to house the cows, the Bontekoes called a builder right away.

As is their policy, the Bontekoes did not borrow any money to rebuild the freestall barn and replace the tractor. High milk prices coupled with insurance payments from the loss allowed the family

to pay for the new construction. Working out an agreement with their builder to pay what they had during the construction phase also helped. Replacing the tractor was postponed until the right used one could be found at a good price.

“Some months we were tight, but we didn’t have to take a cut in salary,” Scott says.

Being uprooted from their comfortable freestalls and placed on pasture all the time during a wet year caused a drop in the cows’ production. The new sand bedded freestall barn with larger stalls helped to get production back up.

“The new barn has bigger stalls and is so much more comfortable than the old one that we saw an immediate rise in milk production,” Scott says. “By bedding with sand, we are not seeing the flare-ups in somatic cell like we did when it rained.” The farm used straw to bed the cattle prior to switching to sand.

The Bontekoes felt production and milk quality could be raised further, so they began to make changes in their management and feeding practices.

“Several improvements we have made in the last few years have attributed to higher production and better quality,” Scott says.

Milk samples were sent to the MMPA Novi Lab and tests came back confirming environmental mastitis. Scott dry-treats all cows but saw a big reduction in new mastitis cases when he began using Spectramast, which has proven much more successful than other treatments.

They also began working with a new nutritionist and feed mill. The nutritionist suggested some ration changes that has also helped increase milk production. The production increases, coupled with decent milk prices, allow Scott to cull more selectively.

“When production averages are up, I can cull a bit more,” Scott says. “My thought is if she produces less than 40 pounds and has no calf, I consider culling her.”

All cows on the farm are bred artificially using Select Mating Service. Cows that don’t catch are inseminated two additional times before Scott considers removing them from the herd. No bull is used in the milking herd.

“We are walking through the yards a lot and we don’t want a bull running around there for safety reasons,” Scott remarks.

A good quality bull is used for the heifers, which are raised off-site in a barn on Scott’s father’s farm, a mile away.

Both farms that house the Bontekoe’s cows are located in Livingston County, one of the fast-

est growing counties in Michigan. Surprisingly, the operations have not been greatly affected by urban sprawl because there are other dairy and crop farms nearby.

“Urban sprawl is a challenge but something you can’t do a lot about,” Scott says. “We are fortunate to be between three other farms that have chosen to continue to farm. We will continue to farm here and have intentions of farming in the future.”

The couple’s children, Jack, 13, Emily, 10, Faye, 8 and Calvin, 6, could be the seventh generation of Bontekoes to farm on the land their great-grandfather owns. According to Scott and Liz, the four are proud to live on the farm and are active in 4-H, showing poultry, dairy steers and dairy heifers. Liz, who grew up in the suburbs of Grand Rapids, also embraces farm life.

“Even though I had a great childhood in the city, I have come to realize that this farm is the greatest gift we could have,” Liz says. “The importance of family and how we depend on each other, as well as having a love and respect for the animals is something not every family is able to experience.”

Scott and Liz are members of the Livingston Charter Local where Scott serves as president and Liz is a Dairy Communicator. Both are active in the county Farm Bureau, 4-H and their church. Liz recently began working full-time at Linden Elementary Schools as a Special Education Aide, which helps the couple offset the rising cost of health insurance.



The Bontekoe family, from left: Jack, Liz, Calvin, Scott, Faye and Emily.