

Determined to Dairy

District 12 OYDC Laura Rivard chose to continue dairy farming with her in-laws after the quick passing of her young husband.



The Hawaiian Islands are a long way away from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, but the two locations are both close to the heart and mind of District 12 OYDC Laura Rivard.

Laura was born and raised in Hawaii where she raised dairy goats. When it was time for her to go to college, her love of livestock animals led her to Iowa State University where she soon met her future husband, Wade Rivard — a dairy farmer from Daggett, Michigan.

By the time Laura was a sophomore, the pair had married and were soon expecting their daughter, Alana. The Rivards made plans to return to Daggett where they would join Wade's family farm and eventually take over the dairy operation. The young family's plans were soon turned upside down when Wade was diagnosed with cancer.

"During my senior year of college, Alana's dad got sick with a rare form of cancer," Laura says. "I moved to the farm in December 2003 and he passed away in June 2004. We had planned to come here and farm, that was going to be our life, so his parents said Alana and I still had a place here."

While Wade was sick, his parents, Peggy and Lloyd Rivard, and Laura took turns caring for him and tending to farm duties. When his parents were caring for him, Laura began to take over more and more farm responsibilities. A year after her husband's passing, Laura asked her in-laws if she could continue farming with them. They agreed and now plan to turn the farm over to Laura, who wants to continue dairy farming in Daggett.

"I will take over the main dairy operations from my in-laws in January 2010," Laura says. "That includes the complete purchase of the cows and leasing the facility."

Once it was determined that Laura did intend to stay and create a future on the Rivard farm, she and the Rivards set about making some improvements to cattle housing.

“In 2006, we expanded the barn to incorporate the same number of cows, but upgraded it to better facilitate our needs,” Laura says. “We put in metal freestalls to reduce maintenance, added 100 stalls to the sides of the main barn to keep the cows comfortable in our harsh winter climate.”

The farm partners also renovated a dry cow barn that can house 150 cows in new freestalls.

Cow comfort and longevity is very important at Rivard Farms. It is not uncommon for cows to be in their ninth lactation and even as much as their 13th lactation on the farm.

“We don’t aim for high production, we aim for longevity of our cows,” Laura explains. “We don’t push them hard to produce large quantities of milk, and we take good care of their feet and legs by getting them off the concrete and putting them on pasture.”

Cows are given access to pasture most of the year, except when it is too cold or icy. They are brought in to the freestalls when it is time to milk them and then stay in the freestall until they are done eating. Afterward, they are let out to pasture where they can continue to eat hay.

“I feel getting the cows out on the pasture helps to keep their rumen healthy because they get more of that scratch factor and definitely aids in heat detection,” Laura says. “We also have our cows calve on pasture— I think that is healthier for both the cow and her calf.”

All cows and calves are raised on the farm, with an emphasis placed on the young stock. The herd is closed, so no cows have been added in at least ten years nor do they ever leave the farm to be raised by others.

“Replacement heifers are very important to us,” Laura says. “They are always going to be fed, bedded, clean and vaccinated just as the cows would be. We give them 100 percent of our efforts, because they are the future of our herd.”

Keeping a close eye on mastitis and the herd’s overall Somatic Cell Count is also important at Rivard Farms. The farm partners have earned the MMPA Bronze Quality Award for seven consecutive years in a row and are currently working on year number eight.

To achieve this, all suspect cows are CMT tested before their milk enters the tank. Laura pays close attention to DHIA test sheets, finding the highest SCC cows and checking each of those cow’s quarters with a CMT test. If a cow only has a problem in one quarter, a quarter milker will be used, if every quarter has a problem, her milk will not enter the tank and she will be removed from the milking string and treated for mastitis.

As she takes over more of the dairy operation, Laura plans to maintain cow numbers between 300-400 and slowly improve the farm’s facilities over time.

“I want to stay in the 300-400 cow range because I want the lifestyle that farming has, yet I want to have enough time off that I can dedicate to being an active parent to my daughter.”

~ Rivard Dairy Farm ~



Laura Rivard with her daughter: Alana, 6

One Thing that Makes a Difference on Our Farm is...

We aim for longevity of our cows by not pushing them too hard for high production and taking good care of their feet and legs by getting them off the concrete and putting them on pasture.

~ MMPA Member of ~

District 12
Menominee-Vacationland Local

~ Herd size ~

350 milking and dry

~ Replacements ~

360

~ Acres Farmed ~

900

~ Milking Set-Up ~

Double-6 herringbone parlor