

Environmentally Aware

District 5 OYDC Mike and Sonja Rasmussen run their Edmore-area dairy farm with an eye on environmental awareness.



It's not every day you hear a farmer speak positively about a visit from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), so consider the recent experience of District 5 OYDC Mike Rasmussen.

A neighboring dairy farm complained to the DEQ last summer, claiming Hillhaven Farms had discharged milkhouse wastewater into a swamp near the complainant's property.

"Two field staffers from the DEQ came out to follow up on the complaint, which was totally unfounded," says Mike, who operates Hillhaven with his father, Chris.

The DEQ wanted to know about the Rasmussens' waste management practices, so Mike took them out to their separate wastewater and manure lagoons.

"They were impressed with all of the practices we had implemented—said they wished all the farms they visited were run like ours—with an eye toward nutrient management, and protecting our resources," Mike says.

Hillhaven Farms will hit the century mark in 2009, and Mike would like to see it stay in operation much longer than that. To ensure that longevity, the Rasmussens prioritize keeping the farm up-to-date with environmental regulations and recommendations.

"That's something that's important to me, because I see the regulatory environment in Michigan getting stricter due to a few bad apples," Mike says.

Most dairymen are more comfortable discussing herd production numbers than cropping and the environment, but Mike alternates between these subjects with ease.

"Resource management and soil conservation are a high priority here. What we've found is that we can get paid for what we're already doing," Mike says. "We are at the highest level of involvement in the CSP."

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a voluntary program that rewards farmers whose operations meet the highest standards of conservation and environmental management. It creates financial incentives to help keep farmers like Mike farming in a way that benefits soil, water and air resources. Only landowners and producers in designated watersheds are eligible to sign up for CSP. In Michigan, six watersheds have been designated since 2004, and 574 Michigan producers—including the Rasmussens—were accepted into the program.

Hillhaven Farms receives incentives for its land conservation and waste management practices. The farm's Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) is a detailed document addressing those practices and how they're implemented on the farm. The CNMP does require some additional recordkeeping, but beyond that, Mike says it was not difficult to complete, since he had been utilizing minimum-tillage and proper manure management practices on the farm's 900 acres for many years.

With an eye on the environment and mind on business, Mike and his wife, Sonja, try to get the maximum benefit from incentive programs, researching whether they can receive assistance when implementing environmentally responsible projects on the farm. For instance, when they finished constructing their parlor, they learned they could receive assistance designing and funding a milkhouse wastewater lagoon through NRCS.

"We have an NRCS-approved rubber-lined milkhouse wastewater lagoon just for our milkhouse wastewater," Mike says.

The contents of that lagoon are irrigated twice a year on 40 acres (a different 40 acres in spring and fall) through a movable pivot. Mike says there is hardly any nutrient content in what is sprayed on the fields, but they still need to keep close records of what and how much is irrigated for the CNMP.

Mike's attention to detail carries over into the crops he grows on the land he conserves, and says he thinks there's value in the traditional Midwestern farm—where feed can be grown at the same cost or less than it takes to buy it.

"I feel better growing our own feed—it gives us more control over quality," Mike says. "I am very picky about putting up feed, and that's enabled us to feed a 60–70 percent forage diet while still getting high production and achieving excellent health with the cows."

Harvesting haylage at the right time, as well as growing brown mid-rib corn (BMR), which is more easily digested by the cows, helps the Rasmussens successfully feed the cows a diet high in forage matter.

Paying close attention to detail and taking advantage of assistance programs have helped the Rasmussens maintain their current 600-cow herd for the past six years without having to add more head to increase their income. They also keep close track of finances, and, since Sonja does the bookkeeping, they're able to conduct impromptu farm finance meetings over the dinner table.

"Talking about the farm's finances often really helps from a day-to-day management standpoint," Sonja says.

~ Hillhaven Farms ~



Mike and Sonja Rasmussen with their children Wilbert, Gracie (inset and in Mike's arms) and Jesse.

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

Our farm is big enough to provide an excellent place to work, but still a manageable size to keep a family farm atmosphere.

~ MMPA Members of ~
Alma Local
District 5

~ Herd size ~
600 milking and dry

~ Replacements ~
450, raised off-farm

~ Acres Farmed ~
900

~ Milking Set-Up ~
Double-16 Herringbone

~ Ag and Dairy Involvement ~

Mike is the Alma Local vice president and a delegate for MMPA District 5. He serves on the MMPA State Nominating and Advisory Committees. He is on the Montcalm County DHIA executive committee and also serves on the Montcalm County Farm Bureau Candidate Evaluation Committee. Mike and Sonja are 4-H leaders in their community, where Mike is president of the horse leaders' group.