



Sarah Cavanaugh (left) and Jody Jones handling the milking and other daily work on the Cavanaugh farm.

Employees Make the Difference at this year's Quality Award Farm

Ask Kevin Cavanaugh why his 55-cow dairy was MMPA's 2007 Top Quality Award winner and you'll probably hear these two reasons: conscientious employees and a push to clear up mastitis in the herd.

Earlier this year, Kevin was named MMPA's 2007 Top Quality Award Winner with an average somatic cell count of 53,583 raw bacteria count of 1,000 and a PI bacteria count of 1,083. The farm, near Leslie, obtained the highest quality records of all MMPA farms throughout the year.

The herd also achieved the lowest somatic cell count in three of the four states (Michigan, Indiana and Ohio) among the NorthStar Cooperative DHI Services members in that region.

"I didn't intend to win the award," Kevin says. "We just needed to clear up the mastitis problems. My employees pay close attention to any changes in the cows and concentrate on finding anything wrong with them before it becomes a problem."

Kevin's quality team consists of himself and two full-time employees: his daughter Sarah and a nearby neighbor, Jody Jones. A few years ago, the herd's somatic cell count reached as high as 250,000, a point at which Kevin felt was too high. He instituted an aggressive mastitis prevention and treatment program that Jody and Sarah have executed effectively.

Cows are monitored in the parlor for gargety milk and for somatic cell count. All cows are on DHI test and Sarah reviews the reports for somatic cell numbers as soon as they are received.

"If we see a high cell count—anything over 150,000—I am going after that mastitis," Kevin says.

Any cow that has a high cell count or presents with mastitis is removed from the milking string and immediately treated.

Bad cases are given an IV of oxytetracycline along with treatment. Kevin says since all cows react differently to antibiotics, and some keep the medicine in their system longer than others, that SNAP testing is a must when treating a lactating cow. Any cow that doesn't clear up after that regimen is shipped and never introduced back into Cavanaugh's milking string.

While Kevin takes credit for formulating the farm's effective mastitis protocol, he takes little credit for the efficient milking procedure carried out by Sarah and Jody in the farm's parlor. Kevin has worked full-time as a corrections officer in Jackson for the past 10 years, leaving him little time to spend in the parlor.

"After working at the prison, it is kind of nice to come home to good animals," Kevin jokes about his dual occupations. "I am lucky and blessed to have the good help I've got here on the farm. They are such good help that I can go away and have a full time job in addi-



Sarah Cavanaugh uses the foam dipper to prep the cows for milking.

tion to dairy farming. It seems like the less time I spend in the parlor, the better the somatic cell count gets.”

Jody oversees the selection of part-time employees she feels will benefit the farm, and Kevin says he’s impressed with the quality of help she recruits. He is also pleased with the quiet, conscientious way she deals with the cows. She trains employees to act the same way around the animals as well.

“Kevin’s delegating management style and training of his employees is a model for others to follow,” says Gary Trimmer, MMPA’s Director of Member Services and Quality Control. “It’s proof positive that you can achieve outstanding quality milk production through excellent employees.”

Kevin and his employees take advantage of the MMPA Milker Training Schools offered free of charge to MMPA members and their employees each year. Jody, Sarah and some of the farm’s part-time employees have attended the schools, picking up pointers to help fine-tune their milking procedures.

“Cow prep is such a big deal,” Kevin comments. “We were doing most of it right. They now wear gloves during milking and post dip a little further on the teat as a result of what they learned at the school.”

Kevin thinks the Milker Training Schools are a valuable service and plans to continue sending his employees annually.

Sarah and Jody, sometimes with assistance from a part-time employee, milk the cows two times a day in a double-four herringbone parlor.

Cows are pre-wiped with a dairy paper towel purchased from MMPA Merchandise, then pre-dipped with half-percent iodine using a foam dipper. Teats are then massaged and pre-stripped, then the dip is wiped off with a paper towel before the milking unit is attached.

After attending Milker Training School, Jody and Sarah timed themselves to see if they were leaving

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– Kevin Cavanaugh

enough time between teat stimulation and milking unit attachment to allow milk letdown. They were pleased to find that their practices were very close to the recommended timing taught in the schools.

“Sarah and Jody have refined our milking procedure and are very picky and conscientious,” Kevin says. “They are a big reason the farm received the MMPA award.”

When the milking unit is released, cows are post-dipped with Ecolab’s Ideal post-dip, a one-percent iodine barrier dip also purchased through MMPA Merchandise. He says he thinks it is the best post dip available.

Sarah and Jody make sure the milk claws, pipeline and parlor are very clean after each milking. Kevin used to have the dealer come out to check the milking system, but last time chose to have MMPA perform a system check instead.

“I was really pleased with the system check from MMPA,” Kevin says. “They caught something the dealer hadn’t.”

After making the minor adjustments and air filter additions suggested by MMPA, Kevin says the system is working very well.

A stringent mastitis program and excellent milking procedure make a big difference in producing quality milk on the Cavanaugh farm, but they aren’t the only factors at work. Both Kevin and Jody agree that keeping the cows clean and dry makes a huge difference in limiting the recurrence of mastitis and elevated somatic cell counts.

The cows are housed in sand-bedded freestalls, and alleys are scraped several times throughout the day. The cows’ udders are also singed on a regular basis.

“We make sure to keep the freestalls clean,” Jody says.

Kevin says he was surprised when he learned the farm had received MMPA’s Top Quality Award, and now thinks it might be nice to receive it again.