

Adjusting to the Economy

2009 MMPA District 8 OYDC Doug & Kim Clunis

Dairy farmers across the country are tightening their belts and finding ways to cut costs while trying to remain afloat during one of the longest periods of low milk prices dairy farmers have experienced. The situation is no different at Silver Creek Dairy Corp. in Elkton, where owners Doug and Kim Clunis have cut back on monthly expenditures to make ends meet.

"With the low milk prices, we've had to cut back on a lot of expenses," Kim says. "We are now doing DHI testing and veterinary herd health checks every other month instead of every month like we were doing. That's helped cut

back on our monthly bills."

Silver Creek Dairy is family owned and operated, with Doug, Kim and her sons Ryan, 18, and Austin, 15, doing the majority of the labor on the farm. They do have one full-time hired person who milks in the evenings, but due to low milk prices, have had to cut his hours back. The family is able to perform many health-related cow procedures on their own, which also helps reduce expenses.

"Cutting back on the services is actually working out well for us, and we plan to continue doing at least the vet checks that way," Kim says. "We're able to take care of twisted stomachs, and infuse the cows when they need it without veterinary assistance."

While cutting back on monthly expenses has helped lift some financial burden for the Clunises, it has also caused some concern in other areas.

"The bank is pushing us to do DHI testing once per month so they can keep track of what their investments are," Doug says. "They're keeping track of cow numbers and milk production."

For now, the Clunises say they are sticking to their monthly

expenditure cutting practices, saying that since they personally work with the cows every day, they are still able to catch health problems right away.

"Kim milks the cows every morning, seven days a week," Doug says. "She knows what's going on with the cows."

"I touch the cows every day so if something's wrong, I know it," Kim adds. "When a cow gets sick we are able to treat her right away."

Each family member has his or her own duties, but all are able to perform most of the duties if need be. Kim milks the cows and does all the paperwork, Doug scrapes and feeds, Austin and Ryan do all of the bedding and care for the milking animals. Austin, who says he wants to farm, is especially intuitive when it comes to operating equipment and doing most other farm duties, says Doug.

Doug started farming at Silver Creek Dairy with 12 cows in 1991. By 1997, he had increased the herd to 60 cows. Soon afterward, Doug and Kim went into partnership together and decided to expand the herd. Kim purchased a group of Ayrshires and the couple began planning their next move. Today, their herd is up to 250 cows, consisting of 2/3 Holsteins and 1/3 Ayrshires.

"We decided we wanted to build a parlor and wanted an employee," Kim says. "We figured if we put more cows in, we could build a parlor and afford a full-time person."

The Clunises built a double-six herringbone parlor in 2003,



Top: The Clunis family: Ryan, Kim, Doug and Austin.

Bottom: Austin and Ryan are responsible for the bedding and care of the family's milking herd.



replacing the farm's original stanchions.

Expanding the herd by more than 20 times its original size meant not only a new parlor and barns; it also meant new systems for dealing with manure.

To reduce the amount of time spent spreading manure and ensure they were following proper manure management practices, the Clunises installed a large manure pit and completed a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP).

Silver Creek Dairy is located on a very busy section of M-142, which, according to Doug, can make dairying—and in particular manure handling—more difficult, as there is almost always traffic on the roadway and curious passersby.

"It's really important that you follow all of the guidelines and rules of the CNMP especially when you live on a main highway," Doug says.

To make the lagoon less visual from the roadway, Doug used the dirt he dug out of the lagoon to create a berm around it, and recommends the practice to other farmers constructing a lagoon on

their farms. The Clunises financed the lagoon themselves without government assistance.

"You can't see the pit when you drive by, unless maybe you are in a semi," Kim comments.

There are approximately 80 acres of tillable ground touching the lagoon, so Doug is able to spread much of the manure without driving on the roadway.

"We wait until the roads are dry before we try to get down the road with a load of manure," Doug says. "People don't like driving through mud or manure on the roadway."

In the summer, liquid from the top of the lagoon is hauled to the farm's hayfields in the dairy's liquid transport vehicle.

With the CNMP in place, Doug and Kim say they are working toward verification through the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP). There are a few costly upgrades which need to occur before they could receive MAEAP verification, so the Clunises have put those on hold until milk prices recover.



Silver Creek Dairy Corp. Facts:

MMPA Members of: District 8 and the West Huron Local

Herd size: 250 milking and dry; 183 replacements

Acres farmed: 450

Milking set-up: double-6 herringbone parlor

Ag and community involvement: Doug is a former board member of the local DHI. Kim serves on the Huron Youth Center board, is an Oliver Township Fireman Auxiliary and is a Boy Scouts of America volunteer.

"One thing that makes a difference on our farm is... We spend quality time with our family while teaching the responsibilities of dairy farming."