

Overcoming Johne's

2008 MMPA District 1 OYDC Mike and Lisa Van Riper



In the mid nineties, the owners of Dottie-O-Dairy Ranch in Chelsea began increasing the size of their herd as part of a planned expansion of the dairy. About the same time they were remodeling and enlarging the farm's milking parlor, some of the herd began showing symptoms of Johne's disease.

"Once we noticed the problem we started testing the herd and found out we had a really high prevalence rate," Mike says. "We purchased the problem with cows we bought and it manifested from there."

Mike is the herdsman at Dottie-O-Dairy, owned in partnership by Mike, his brother Bill Jr., sister Linda, her husband, Gary and their son, Colton White. The Van Ripers' father, Bill, has mostly retired from the farm but still helps out with bookkeeping.

"We had to decrease the herd at first," Mike says. "Now we're on the end of that so we can expand from within instead of purchasing animals and going through the same thing with something else."

At the worst point, the Johne's Disease prevalence in the Dottie-O-Dairy herd was nearly 25 percent. Through changes in management practices and culling, the Van Ripers were able to get prevalence down to under two percent.

"We probably culled a little heavier than we needed to, but it was good to get rid of those cows," Mike says.

Culling cows with a high prevalence of Johne's disease does little to stop the spread of the disease unless management practices are also changed. Once the disease was discovered at Dottie-O-Dairy, Mike went to work right away, instituting many management changes.

“We now test cows for Johne’s at dryoff so we know who’s positive so we can handle their calves accordingly,” Mike explains of the farm’s management changes. “We move calves from Johne’s cows right away, and sanitize the maternity pens right away.”

A freshening/maternity pen that is sanitized after each use was added as one measure to reduce Johne’s prevalence in the herd. Mike also switched to feeding milk replacer to all heifer calves. Bull calves are still fed raw milk, as they leave the farm shortly after being born. Colostrum from Johne’s negative cows is frozen and fed to calves from cows with Johne’s.

When the Johne’s disease was discovered, Dottie-O-Dairy was expanding the herd internally and through purchases as well as making facility improvements to house the larger herd. The parlor had just been remodeled from a double-8 to a double-10 herringbone. At that time, the herd was up to 170 milk cows. At its lowest point, the herd was at 120 milk cows and is now back up, to around 140.

“Our goal is to increase the herd by 10 to 15 percent per year internally, up to 225 cows maximum,” Mike says. “We can milk 180 in our existing facility but can easily expand to accommodate 225 cows.”

Part of the facility improvements included adding rubber mattresses and replacing all of the freestalls in the barn to increase cow comfort.

“Our main goal in adding the mattresses was to increase cow comfort and decrease somatic cell count,” Mike says. “It’s helped their feet and legs and increased milk production, too.”

With sound cow management practices in place and the sting of Johne’s disease behind them, Mike says the farm partners can now focus on other farm goals, such as working toward Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) verification. Mike’s brother, Bill, serves on the local soil conservation board and is spearheading the farm’s efforts toward MAEAP verification. So far, the farm has added an additional lagoon to handle runoff from the farm’s new heifer and calf barns as well as contain parlor wastewater.

To save on fertilizer costs and to move toward the completion of a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) for the farm, manure and soil samples are tested at least once a year.

“We utilize manure as much as we can to reduce our fertilizer costs,” Mike says.

The farm partners no-till most of their corn and all of their soybeans and wheat. Manure is irrigated on the fields to reduce compaction. In order to reach more of the fields, extra hose was purchased but the additional reel that was needed did not fit into the farm’s cash flow.

“My brother, Bill, builds some equipment for us,” Mike says. “He built the hose reel from things we had around the farm.”

Mike adds that Bill’s, Gary’s and Colton’s talents and innovative abilities around the farm have helped to save the farm a lot of money.

Dottie-O-Dairy Ranch



Mike and Lisa Van Riper, with their children: Gage, 5, Bria, 3 and Jada, 1.

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

Our innovative abilities to build and repair equipment needed on the farm.

~ *MMPA Member of* ~
District 1

Ann-Arbor Saline Local

~ *Herd size* ~
140 milking and dry

~ *Replacements* ~
150

~ *Acres Farmed* ~
1,000

~ *Milking Set-Up* ~
Double 10 herringbone parlor

~ *Ag and Dairy Involvement* ~

Mike Serves as chairman of the Jackson and Washtenaw County DHI board of directors. He also serves on the Washtenaw County Farm Bureau board.