

Three Times A Charm



MMPA member Kevin Cavanaugh achieves the MMPA Top Quality Award for the third year in a row.

Three-time MMPA Top Quality Award winner Kevin Cavanaugh says that any dairy farmer can achieve the same impressive quality levels his Ireland Bells Dairy consistently accomplishes if they pay attention to details and utilize the MMPA products and services available to all members.

That's a rather humble statement considering this year marks the first time an MMPA producer has ever won the cooperative's impressive Top Quality Award three times. What's even more impressive is that Kevin has won this award three years in a row. Kevin's herd achieved the following quality averages this past year: 45,917 SCC; 2,167 PI and 1,083 Raw Bacteria.

"It's absolutely incredible that Kevin has been able to win MMPA's Top Quality Award for three consecutive years," Gary Trimner, MMPA Director of Member Services says. "This is the first time we have ever had a three-time winner."

The milking and cow housing facility at Ireland Bells Dairy is modest and unassuming, proving that fancy setups aren't needed to achieve high quality milk. The farm's 60 milk cows rest in a traditional-style barn retrofitted to house 70 sand bedded freestalls. Cows eat at a modest feed bunk and drink warm plate cooler water outside year-round.

The milking parlor, formerly a double-6 herringbone, has been reduced to a double-4 to make it easier for one person to do the milking. As cows enter the parlor, they are wiped with a clean, dry towel from the MMPA Merchandise Program. Teats are dipped with Aloe, an iodine-based pre-dip purchased through MMPA Merchandise. The dip is worked into each teat with a gloved hand and all teats are pre-stripped. The

person milking moves on to the next cow, wipes her with a dry towel and repeats the predipping process. The milker returns to the first cow, wipes the teat dip off with a clean towel and attaches the milking unit. There are no automatic take-offs so the person milking removes the unit and post-dips the teats with Ideal, a barrier dip available through MMPA Merchandise.

The farm's milking procedures follow practices similar to those taught at MMPA Milker Training Schools, which Kevin and his employees have attended for the past several years.

"I always pick up a pointer at the Milker Training Schools," Kevin says. "I always find something new I can implement every year. Our milk quality was good before we started attending the schools, but I think pointers we learn there have helped us keep our SCC down."

Kevin says while the curriculum may not vary much from year to year at the Milker Training Schools, he finds that there is so much information to take in that it pays to attend each year, as there may be something he's not picked up on in a prior year. This year, he brought back the importance of making a conscious effort to be sure to really massage the pre dip into the teat and wait before removing it and attaching the milking unit to make the iodine more effective and allow for oxytocin letdown.

"Kevin and his employees have been able to utilize and implement the techniques taught at MMPA's Milker Training Schools," Gary says. "For many years, either Kevin or one of his employees has attended the schools."

Monthly DHI reports are carefully monitored and cows with an SCC over 100,000 are watched.

“If a cow’s SCC is over 150,000, we generally treat her, though sometimes they can come down on their own,” Kevin says. “Any cows with a SCC over 200,000 are automatically treated.”

Over the past year, Kevin estimates they treated 12 cows for high SCC, two of which showed clinical signs of mastitis, such as gargety milk. He treats the high count milk cows with ToDAY and finds that treatment to work well in most cases. He dry treats with ToMORROW and makes sure to test all fresh cows for elevated SCC before adding them to the milking string.

“I use the Porta SCC milk test from MMPA to test all fresh cows before I decide whether or not to put them in the tank,” Kevin says. “Everyone who wants high quality milk should be doing that.”

Monthly herd health checks by a veterinarian and a regular vaccination plan are additional elements Kevin says helps keep his cows healthy and producing high quality milk.

“Once you get your SCC down, you don’t have too many problems,” Kevin says. “We just don’t have many mastitis cases now. Monitoring the SCC, catching high counts right away and treating them before it gets bad is key.”

“I believe the attention to detail while milking the cows and managing the herd has allowed Kevin and his employees to achieve outstanding quality,” Gary says.

“Their quality record is truly outstanding.”

Even with the additional income from quality premiums, low milk prices affected management decisions on Kevin’s farm, too, causing him to reduce protein in the herd’s TMR and to look at other nutrition options.

“Our milk production has been down because milk prices were so low,” Kevin says. “I didn’t purchase any additional protein this year.”

Low milk prices, coupled with Kevin’s desire to reduce labor and increase cow health have caused him to convert some of the 300 acres he farms to pasture. The cows will have to wait to experience grazing until next year, Kevin says, until the forages are well established in the paddocks.

“I put in high tensile fence all around the farm and am going to intensive grazing,” Kevin says. “I think the profits will be better, it will be healthier for the cows and hopefully, it will be less work.”

Kevin was able to apply for a grant through the NRCS to help finance the fencing as well as getting assistance for the first year’s seeding. He said the process took about a year, but was worth getting some extra help in order to afford moving toward this new management practice.

“I’m not yet sure how grazing will affect our quality levels, but I think it will be all right and hoping it may even be better,” Kevin says.



After being wiped clean of debris with a dry towel, teats are dipped (left photo) with Aloe, an iodine-based pre-dip purchased through MMPA Merchandise. The dip is worked into each teat with a gloved hand and all teats are pre-stripped. The person milking moves on to the next cow, wipes her with a dry towel and repeats the predipping process. The milker returns to the first cow, wipes the teat dip off (right photo) with a clean towel and attaches the milking unit.