



## Vermont Farm Lauded for Green Technology

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BRIDPORT, Vt. — The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy recently awarded Blue Spruce Farm Inc. with the Elanco Award for Outstanding Dairy Farm Sustainability as a tribute to the farm's efforts to make the operation as sustainable as possible.

Marie Audet, business manager and wife of Eugene Audet, one of the partners, said receiving the accolade was "obviously very humbling. It is very rewarding, as well, because it is kind of a public affirmation for our desire to produce quality milk.

"What's good for the animals is good for the environment and community."

Though you may not have heard of Blue Spruce Farm, nationally distributed Cabot Cheese is made in part with milk from Blue Spruce's 1,300 milking Holsteins. The farm also raises 60 Ayrshires.

The farm produces more than 30 million pounds of milk annually and farms 3,000 acres of crops for feeding the herd.

Although "sustainability" wasn't part of the Audets' vocabulary 20 years ago, they, like many other farmers, believe that farming by its very nature requires sustainable practices to stay profitable and community-oriented.

As early as the mid-'90s, the three-generation farm began its foray into sustainable agriculture as one of the first farms in the country to install a variable-speed vacuum pump control.

Estimating how long it has taken to recoup the expense from the equipment has been a challenge, but "as the price of electricity goes up it makes even more economic sense," Audet said. "The guys here are very forward and brave to take risks and embrace technology."

Another of Blue Spruce's initiatives was joining Vermont's Cow Power program that uses methane to generate power.

"It hits all those aspects of sustainability," Audet said. "It makes sense to the farm and the community around us. It closes that loop."

In addition to generating power, the digester generates solids the farm uses to bed the herd.

“We’re reducing our input,” Audet said. “Sawdust is \$2,000 per load and it took at least a load a week to bed the cows.”

The farm also captures excess heat from the generator to heat the farm’s water, and heat the office and milking parlor during the winter. The furnace in the farm’s equipment repair shop runs on used oil from the generator.

Investing in pumps, piping, concrete, generator, anaerobic digester and a building for housing the generator wasn’t an easy decision. It cost \$1.3 million in 2005 with an estimated seven-year recouping time. But since the farm has reinvested more than that in updated equipment since then, it will take even longer.

“We’ve gained the confidence that we’ll be able to pay it back,” Audet said. “We put in a more efficient generator to help us generate more electricity.”

Adding a second digester in December 2011 doubled the capacity to 1.2 million gallons total.

“We’re always upgrading something,” Audet said with a chuckle.

Improving cow comfort in the milking parlor is one of the farm’s top objectives. A recent project involves replacing rubber floors.

Maintaining good relationships with neighbors is a part of how Blue Spruce operates. The farm recently invested in a drag line system so employees can aerate the fields while spreading manure on them. It replaced manure trucks constantly going up and down roads, traffic which the public tends to dislike.

“We inject the nutrients right at the plants’ root level,” Audet said. “That whole process reduces runoff if you have a weather event.

“We’re proud that we’re able to deliver this affordable food that is a staple to many families. You can go into a store and the shelves are filled and we do this while being good stewards of the land and good neighbors. We keep America’s landscape vital and productive.”

Other winners of the Elanco Award for Outstanding Dairy Farm Sustainability included Holsum Dairies LLC, of Hilbert, Wis., and Werkhoven Dairy Inc., of Monroe, Wash.



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