

California dairy shows little things equal sustainability

Progressive Dairyman Editor Walt Cooley

Brian Medeiros says making a dairy business sustainable – the kind that means “more green” and one that makes more of it – is found in the little things.

The 24-year-old California dairyman returned to his parents’ 2,500-cow dairy in Hanford just a few years ago since graduating from Cal Poly. Since then, he’s been looking for ways to make the dairy more sustainable.

“Dairying used to be a matter of just milking cows,” Medeiros says. “If you took care of them, they would take care of you. It’s not so any more. Like every dairy farmer knows, it takes a lot more fine-tuned evaluation of your business to make sure things are running smoothly.”

Medeiros says his family’s dairy has made three recent investments that have made a big difference in the dairy’s three pillars of sustainability, or their “triple bottom line” – their environmental stewardship, employee well-being and improved cash flow. As they are able, they plan to do similar sustainability projects in the future.

“Everything is about efficiency,” Medeiros says. “We do things that any dairy farmer can do.”

Upgrading the parlor

The dairy recently installed new automatic take-offs and milking control units in its 20-year-old parlor. Medeiros says the new equipment better ensures that cows are milked the same way every milking. It’s also shaved 45 minutes off of each shift’s milking time.

While shorter parlor on-time definitely saves on energy costs, Medeiros says the greatest benefit from the change has been for the employees.

“They’re not running back and forth checking if this cow or that cow is done milking yet and having to manually take off equipment,” he says. “They are still moving and hustling, but it’s a more calm environment.”

Since the installation, Medeiros retrained all of his milkers on the dairy’s milking procedures, how to use the equipment and has also instituted a shift-of-the-month award to encourage teamwork and continued milk quality.

Managing feed

Medeiros says that someone recently called him not a dairyman but a “commodity processor” because he feeds commodities

to cows and turns them into milk. While Medeiros rejects the simplification of his profession, he said managing feedstock supplies and ration margins is something that is essential to any dairy’s sustainability – both in reducing

the amount of feed needed to produce milk as well as its overall cost.

Medeiros recognizes the dairy’s rations are much more accurate now, even though total feeding time takes about an hour longer than it

used to. That’s most likely because of the dairy’s new feeder bonus program. Employees are paid extra based on how accurately they mix and deliver rations to the cows.

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"Employees are now paying attention," Medeiros says. "If they have that last quarter of a bucketful of feed, they're not just dumping it into the mixer. They know: 'If I put this in, it's going to mess up my bonus.'"

The feed management software upgrade also now allows Medeiros to make ration changes on the fly using his iPad.

"Before we were using an old DOS-based system. When we did new load sheets, I had to go in and manually recalculate everything. Now I can put in new numbers from anywhere and it calculates the rest itself."

Medeiros believes more widespread adoption of technology for mobile devices on dairies are

just around the corner. He believes they will likely help dairymen better manage cows and not just inanimate inputs, such as commodities or energy.

"Those tools will do more of the analytical work for us," Medeiros says. "Right now we still have to go through and manually take temps or pull milk tests and then go back and figure out which cows are sick or low in milk."

Implementing technology has helped Medeiros control his feed costs. He believes it holds the potential to do the same for costs related to cow health, too.

Conserving fuel

"We say we use a lot of feed, but we also use a lot of diesel,"

Medeiros says.

For that reason, the dairy also recently installed GPS systems on all of its farm tractors. Medeiros also recently strategically replaced some of its heavy-use tractors with newer models.

Medeiros says it saves the dairy on diesel fuel and emissions as well as wear on equipment. But like other sustainability investments on the dairy, he's also seen a positive social impact for his three full-time farm workers as well.

"Now we don't have employees sitting there with tunnel vision looking out at the horizon to make sure they keep the tractor straight," Medeiros says. "They can relax a lot more. They're more at ease."

Since 2009, the dairy has increased the land it farms. The second-generation dairy family places great importance in building strong relationships with their neighbors and local growers, the part of its focus on sustainability that impacts the community as well.

"We tell them that we are going to buy [their feed] this year, next year and every year as long as we are here."

Medeiros claims growing his own feed is the best form of risk management.

"Being able to grow more of my own feed has been a big saver," he says.

The dairy does also forward-contract some of its feeds, including corn, which Medeiros has contracted out through the end of the first quarter of this year.

Beyond round numbers

Medeiros believes that long-term sustainability in the dairy industry lies in managing the details.

"In the past, it used to be that if you used round numbers, you were good to go. Now it's the little things that keep getting by dairymen that are costly. At the end of the year they can add up to a big problem."

In the years to come, Medeiros doesn't plan to stop his dairy's myopic focus on incremental improvement.

"The last few years have shown us we need to pay attention. In the next few years, we are going to have to pay even more attention because margins aren't getting any bigger." **PD**

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