

Holsum Dairies tour highlights sustainability

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DAIRY/LIVESTOCK EDITOR

"Reduce, reuse, recycle" is truly the motto at Holsum Dairies, LLC. Reducing energy usage, reusing water and recycling nutrients back into the soil are only a few examples of how two sister dairies near Hilbert exemplify environmental sustainability not just as a practice, but as a way of life.

Holsum Elm Dairy recently opened up its doors to members of the Wisconsin Green Building Alliance, a non-profit educational organization that promotes ecological sustainability within Wisconsin's building and construction community. As a participant in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Green Tier program, Holsum Dairies focus on setting and achieving goals for environmental sustainability above and beyond the requirements. The tour highlighted how sustainability and profitability go hand-in-hand in many aspects at both the Holsum Elm Dairy and Holsum Irish Dairy.

"Like any business, we are here to make a profit," said Dr. Bob Nagel, farm manager at Holsum Elm Dairy. "Reduce, reuse, recycle makes us money, and it also makes us a good neighbor."

Situated on only 89 acres, Holsum Elm has reached out to build relationships in the local agricultural community to source feed and manage nutrients for the 3,600-cow dairy. "We need our community more than they need us," Nagel said. Between the two dairies, they work with 40 neighboring farmers to put up forages.

Kirk Vander Dussen, farm manager at Holsum Irish Dairy, echoed Nagel's comment, saying, "We partner with the community and with the farmers symbiotically." He went on to explain that the local land base provides ample area to apply the nutrient-rich by-product of their

anaerobic digester. In fact, research has shown higher yields in crop fields that have been fertilized with their digested manure, and there is a waiting list of local farmers wanting to purchase it.

Manure that has gone through what Vander Dussen calls the "big, concrete cow rumen" offers a cache of benefits. Unlike liquid manure, it can be applied to growing crops, and because a growing crop can utilize the nutrients quickly, there is reduced risk of runoff. Also appealing is the fact that this manure gives off very little odor.

"People are often not even aware that we are hauling," he said.

Another benefit, according to Nagel, is the ability to partition nutrients for field-specific needs. They are able to monitor the levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and water that are applied. "It's like adding a shot of water and a shot of fertilizer," he said. Throughout the year, the dairies' digesters may take in waste water from a local food processing plant, brewery and other businesses, but any additions and applications must be done in accordance with their nutri-

ent management plan established with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Besides manure handling, one of the other main objectives of the digester is to produce electrical energy. Each day, the digester produces the equivalent energy of 4,000 gallons of propane. While more than enough energy to run the dairy is produced, it is sold back to the grid to power hundreds of homes in the community.

The digester is not the only environmentally sustainable feature of Holsum Elm Dairy. The cows themselves

are, too. "Our cows are the greatest recyclers," both Nagel and Vander Dussen agreed. While corn silage and haylage provide the bulk of their cows' diets, several other feedstuffs are included in the ration, many of which would be considered waste if it were not for the cow's unique ability to digest them. Cottonseed, hominy, distiller's grain, corn gluten and malt sprouts are a few of the by-products that fill the bays of the commodity shed at Holsum Elm. The nearby ethanol plant and brewery communicate

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with the dairies when they have wet feeds that need to be fed quickly.

In the freestall barn, the cows rest on bedding provided by the dry solids from the digester. The barns were designed to conserve energy with insulated ceilings and energy-efficient light fixtures. Even the breeding program revolves around sustainability. "We recycle genetics," Vander Dussen explained. With careful genetic selection, they optimize to breed for cows that will have a

long productive life and efficiently convert feed to milk. Good animal care and genetics are all part of sustainability, Nagel said.

Throughout the tour, both managers complimented their respective farm's employees. "We are blessed with great people that really care about cows," Nagel said. The culture of caring for both animals and the environment is a top-down effect. Crediting the dairies' co-owner Kenn Beulow as a visionary, Nagel added, "At the

heart, Kenn is an environmentalist."

Beulow's leadership has not gone unnoticed. Last month, Holsum Dairies was honored with the U.S. Dairy Sustainability Award at the White House in Washington, D.C. Bestowed on only four dairy farms and two dairy processors throughout the nation, these awards recognized "outstanding economic, environmental and/or social benefit, all helping to advance sustainability of the dairy industry."

DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp commented on the honor saying, "The leadership of this dairy in developing and implementing sustainable practices is a testament to what is possible in dairy agriculture."

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Secretary Ben Brancel also stated, "Holsum Dairies serve as a shining example to other farmers and farm operators in the state and region regarding sustainable farming practices."



Photo by Peggy Coffeen

Holsum Irish Dairy's farm manager Kirk Vander Dussen explained to members of the Wisconsin Green Building Alliance how cows are the ultimate recyclers. Pointing to a newborn calf, he explained that even their breeding philosophy focuses on sustainability through genetic selection.