

A.I. was their only choice

by Hoard's Dairyman staff

STARTING a new dairy is perhaps the most intense management challenge any producer experiences. There are never enough hours in the day to keep up with the endless "surprises" that occur, so flexibility is a must.

Because the top priority is usually getting cows through the parlor to establish cashflow, breeding is often turned over to bulls. A.I. is not forgotten, but the management time and expense it requires typically get pushed onto a back burner until things settle down. Unfortunately, that can sometimes take years.

At Dairyland Milk Co. in Stanfield, Ariz., brothers and co-owners Brian and Scott Blevins felt genetics were much too important to risk delaying. So when milking began at the 2,400-cow facility on November 27, 2001, so did the the A.I. program.

"It was a "no-brainer" decision for us," they recall. "Even before we started construction we had good A.I. peo-

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ple lined up. We decided since we were starting from scratch we should do things right by using A.I. and building our genetics from the beginning. It also made things safer because we had some employees who had never been around bulls before."

Heat detection at the dairy is basic and low-tech: tailhead paint and visual observation. Heats are recorded as early as they are seen, but insemination does not begin until at least 50 days in milk for cows and 60 DIM for heifers. Breedings are done in the morning seven days a week by either herdsman Tony Elenes or route breeder Jason Stew-

art. Preg checks are done by veterinarian Bruce Erickson.

"Every dairyman wants his heat detection and pregnancy rates to be higher, but we're doing OK," says Brian. "Our breeding is good and our heat detection is even better. Ever since day one we've averaged 60 percent of the herd pregnant at any given time."

The dairy's cow comfort-oriented design plays a big role in its heat detection success. Cows can stay under

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cover 24 hours per day if they want, and the huge shade roofs are liberally equipped with fans and misters. Drylots are groomed at least twice per day, parlor walking distances are short, and all alleys and manger areas are rubber-surfaced.

Every cow and heifer is individually mated to proven bulls; young sires are not used at all. "Udder Composites is probably our number one selection criteria, but every bull we buy has to be low Calving Ease, too," says Brian. "Every bull is also plus for Productive Life; we've been looking at that a lot lately. You spend so much on the dairy that you want to get as much life out of your cows as possible."

The brothers admit that A.I. cost and its impact on start-up cashflow was a consideration at first but not for long.

"What many people may not realize is how much it costs to feed a bull," says Scott. "They can really eat. When we got rid of 28 bulls, total feed consumption in each pen went down 2 percent the next day. It was a noticeable difference we could see in the mangers."

"If you think you can't afford A.I. at first, then just buy low-priced semen,"



Scott (left) and Brian Blevins

says Brian. "They may not be great sires, but if you want to breed artificially you can buy \$2 or \$3 straws and still get better calves than with natural service."

It is on this point that the brothers are especially emphatic.

"There's a night and day difference just looking at our A.I. vs. natural-bred heifers," they say. "By the time our A.I. heifers are 6 months old they're bigger, framier, and they do better. We can see it, and we know they're going to give us more milk."

After they had been open just six months, Brian and Scott made another big commitment to their A.I. program by investing in an on-site calf-raising facility. Two covered, elevated-pen flush barns were built to hold a total of 312 calves.

"Our goal was less death loss so we would have more heifers to either keep or sell," they explain. "We had been sending calves as day-olds to a commercial raiser, but death loss was sometimes enormous – at

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one point as high as 30 percent. Since putting in the calf barns, death loss has been pretty steady at 6 percent or less."

If that rate holds, Dairyland Milk Co. figures to generate more than 900 replacement heifers each year. More than 600 are on the ground now, and Scott and Brian are already looking for places to put them.

"We're 200 milking cows short of capacity right now, so we have a couple of extra pens for heifers. That is eventually going to be a problem, but it will be a nice one to worry about when it happens," they say with a smile. 🐄