Good Data Breeds Good Management

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Freund's Farm, Inc. of East Canaan, Connecticut has been around since 1949. The second generation on that farm, brothers Benjamin and Matthew, have been operating together since 1979. They started with 180 cows, and have slowly and methodically increased their herd size to just under 300 Holstein cows today.

Along with their wives, Debra and Theresa, the family owns the dairy, a farm market, and CowPots, which manufactures biodegradable seed starting containers from recycled manure solids. The Freunds are now welcoming the third generation to the business. Benjamin's niece Rachel has taken over as herdsperson at the dairy. She is joined by several siblings and cousins as well, who help operate their other businesses.

"We've been Dairy One customers since time began," says Benjamin. "We've always tested [milk] and have always been interested in using that data for making decisions for our herd." The farm uses Dairy Comp to manage the information they receive from their DHI tests, as well as the information coming in from their new robotic milkers. Another major component in the farm's data set are the results from their blood pregnancy tests.

The Freunds have sent blood samples to the Dairy One lab for pregnancy testing since the company started offering the test. "On a farm our size, you cannot afford to get the vet to pull into the yard. If we had 1200 cows, we could probably get the vet to come in here and compete with the price of the blood test. But with the blood pregnancy test, we're getting weekly information that we couldn't otherwise afford," says Benjamin.

The process of obtaining blood samples is simple. The procedure has been incorporated into their weekly shot routines and Dairy Comp lists. Every Monday Rachel sets the headlocks as the fresh feed is put out. Once all the cows are caught, she and long-time employee and family friend George Russell work their way down the line. Rachel works at the cows' heads, administering vaccinations or synchronization treatments, while George works at the back, taking blood samples from the tail vein and filling and labeling the sample vials.

Each cow is tested once at 30 days post-breeding and again at 60 days. As a form of insurance, cows being tested for pregnancy at 30 days are given a shot of GnRH, so that if their tests come back negative, the re-sync process has already begun and cows can be rebred quicker.

"Sometimes we lose calves at around 45 days or so. The blood test at 60 days, in combination with rumination collars, allows us to catch those cows in heat. I think we catch a lot more cows that might drop their pregnancy after 30 days," says Benjamin.

Photo: The Freund family. From left, Rachel, Isaac, Emily, Amanda, Cole, Matthew, Andy Jack with baby Avina Jack, Sarah, Theresa, Benjamin, and Debra.

Test results are typically available within two to three business days, and are downloaded directly to the Freund's Dairy Comp system automatically. "These guys are seamless to us. We don't even know they exist because they do such a good job. Wednesday afternoon, it just happens, the results just come in. Professionally, they're perfect," says Benjamin about the Dairy One crew. That allows Rachel to start making decisions about who will be re-bred.

On-farm data has now taken an even more important role since the Freunds installed robotic milkers in March of 2016. Along with the information from DHI testing and blood pregnancy testing, there is also data coming from the rumination and activity trackers on the cows' collars. Benjamin says, "The rumination in combination with the activity tacking has proven to be so accurate."

But Rachel still stresses the importance of not relying too much on data alone. "I'm still learning a lot about how to integrate the data and also not forgetting that I still need to put my eyes on the cows."

All of this information gets organized into lists and charts in Dairy Comp. "When we got into the robots, Dairy One set us up with a system where Dairy Comp is the master and the robot is the slave. So we still used Dairy Comp to do all our database management," explains Benjamin.

Rachel says she didn't have any experience with Dairy Comp before she took over as herdsperson, and has leaned on some of the AMR support folks for help with that. "It's one thing to talk on the phone, or to have someone answer a question over Team Viewer, but having an email chain with [the Dairy One Support Staff] allows me to look back in the conversation

Photo: A blood sample is taken from the tail vein. Sample kits are available from Dairy One. Call our office at 1-800-344-2697 ext 2022 or order from the webpage, dairyone.com For more info, email ahd@dairyone.com.

again. If there's any issues with the robot and we have to find out where the root of problem came from, Dairy One will go on Team Viewer and basically investigate to find out why a set of events happened. It's often a human error like someone put in 'died' instead of 'dried.'"

All of this important information, along with the support they get from the Dairy One team means that the Freunds can make the best decisions possible, knowing that they have the most accurate and up-to-date data that they possibly can. Milk testing, rumination and activity tracking along with other data from the robots, as well as blood pregnancy test results, all contribute to the efficiency and success of the farm operation. Benjamin says, "It's very comforting to have the technology support that Dairy One provides us, especially with Dairy Comp. They've got excellent people in the background, and excellent diagnostic services."