

How DCRC award winners achieve near 30 percent pregnancy rates

This fall 58 dairies were nominated by industry professionals to receive the first ever Dairy Cattle Reproductive Council (DCRC) Reproduction Award. Eighteen dairies were recognized for their herd's reproductive efforts; including three dairies owned by NorthStar Co-operative stockowners. NorthStar congratulates Autumn Vista Dairy, McBain, Michigan; Cary Dairy Farm, Battle Creek, Michigan and Jeff Knuver, Fremont, Michigan for the success of their reproductive programs.

We caught up with two of the dairies to learn more about their operations and what they were doing to achieve near 30 percent pregnancy rates.

Explain your current cow reproductive program.

Autumn Vista: We use a program that includes PreSynch with injections at 12/14 days, followed by 56-hour OvSynch. Cows that show heat after the second PreSynch injection are bred, the rest are enrolled in OvSynch. We breed about 40 percent of the herd off visual observation; the synchronization program is our fail safe. We pregnancy check at 34 days. If a cow is due for pregnancy check, she's enrolled in ReSynch on the Saturday prior to that herd health date and given a shot of GnRH. Prostaglandin is given to the open cows the following Friday evening. GnRH is given Monday morning and we breed in the afternoon.

Cary Dairy: We start shots at 63 days, using a PreSynch and OvSynch program. PreSynch shots are given at 12/14 days, and then we tail chalk and breed off heats from the second shot. Maria checks for heats three times a day and is a great assistant. We get about one-third of the cows bred off the PreSynch shots. Eleven days later we start 56-hour OvSynch. We have a 56 hour interval between the Lutalyse® and last GnRH shot. We breed 15 – 16 hours later. We pregnancy check with ultrasound at 28 days and re-check questionable cows again at 35 days. If we get an absolute "no" at that time, we can start cows back on shots sooner. We recheck with ultrasound again at 63 days and if she's confirmed pregnant we give a shot of Leptoferm-5 to help prevent late-term abortions. We ultrasound once more right before dry-off.

What improvements have you seen in your reproduction program with your current protocols?

Autumn Vista: Last year we modified the timing of shots for the Pre-Synch and OvSynch programs. The voluntary waiting period was also changed a couple years ago. First service conception rates are much better now and we saw a little improvement in our pregnancy rate.

Cary Dairy: Previously we gave three shots in the PreSynch, now we give two. We also changed the interval in our OvSynch to 56 hours between the last Lutalyse and GnRH injections. That change has made the biggest difference. We weren't doing badly before, as we would be in the low 20 percent pregnancy range, but now we get to almost 30 percent.

What is your voluntary waiting period (VWP) and why?

Autumn Vista: A couple years ago we pushed out our VWP from 50 to 60 days on older cows and 60 to 70 days on first lactation animals. We made the change because cows weren't settling prior to 60 days. It

was hard to do because we felt if cows were in heat we should breed them. By pushing out our VWP, our first service conception is much better.

Cary Dairy: Sixty days. We chose it because of production. Milk production is high here; we average 92 pounds per cow. We need cows in a positive energy balance to get them pregnant.

What management factors play a significant role in achieving this level of reproductive efficiency?

Autumn Vista: 1) Attention to detail. Our team follows the protocols to a "tee". Everything is done as the protocol states: needle size, amount of product, injection time, etc. 2) Attention to the transition period. Our cow/calving department went back to more natural deliveries. If they have to assist a cow they don't do it mechanically. 3) Communication is critical. Everyone within departments talk daily. We say no question is too small to ask. More formally, our departments meet weekly to discuss issues and ideas. We have a lot of information and resources available to us 24/7.

Cary Dairy: 1) We don't pull any calves, unless there is an emergency. When you pull calves too many times you cause damage and it takes longer for the cow to clean and breed back. 2) We try not to move cows more than we possibly have to. Limiting the number of times you move cows into new groups helps them perform better. All four groups get fed the same ration; except the breeding group has a little extra fat in it. By feeding the same ration, the cows don't know they've changed groups. 3) Body condition is important. Dr. Rob Davis walks the pens every other week to keep the ration correct and pregnancies coming. 4) Cow comfort is also important. We added a new barn for

Autumn Vista Dairy



Autumn Vista Dairy is a 2,000-cow dairy in McBain, Michigan with a pregnancy rate of 27 percent and a rolling herd average on three-times-a-day milking of 26,000 pounds. The reproduction and cow teams include: Jason Towers, Lori Van Haitsma, Miguel Tinagero, Juan M. Enriquez, Rob Harrington, Bernardo Enriquez, and Jose Ramos. Outside professionals include: Dr. Gary Koester, Airport Animal Clinic, Dr. Rob Davis, Progressive Dairy Management, as well as Jim Morgan, Sales Representative and Julie Ainsworth, Dairy Production Analyst with NorthStar Cooperative.

Cary Dairy

transition cows. All stalls are bedded with sand and we try to avoid overcrowding. We did a little culling this summer because we were getting too full and we didn't see any drop in milk production once they were gone. We've also doubled the number of fans in the barn. How people handle cows is really important. Cows don't get excited here.

Explain your current heifer reproductive program.

Autumn Vista: Our goal is to have heifers calving between 24 – 26 months of age. Heifers are housed at three different growers. Two growers in Michigan use visual heat detection and breed A.I. One grower breeds completely with A.I. and the other uses A.I. on first service, followed by a herd bull. We are considering adding a Lutalyse shot to this program so heifers get more opportunities to be bred A.I. The grower in Texas uses the 5-day CIDR Synchronization program. We are also penciling the idea of running that synchronization protocol twice to allow the heifers one more chance at A.I. before a herd bull is used.

Cary Dairy: We breed on natural heats. Our goal is to start breeding at 12 – 13 months of ages. We might give a Lutalyse shot if we are behind.

What role do genetics play in your reproductive program?

Autumn Vista: We had to purchase a lot of animals through the expansion and can really tell the difference between A.I. and non-A.I. sired animals. Part of what's pulled us through this difficult economic time is the genetics of the herd. Julie (Ainsworth, NorthStar Cooperative) tells us what bulls to use. We use the best bulls for the money. Net Merit Dollars is considered, along with having good feet and legs and udders.

Cary Dairy: Julie (Ainsworth, NorthStar Cooperative) picks the bulls. Calving Ease is important and feet and legs are always a high priority. We try to keep a pretty good Net Merit Dollar value. We have used *gender* SELECTed™ semen on heifers.

What advice can you offer other producers who are looking to improve their herd's reproductive efficiency?

Autumn Vista: 1) Have a good team of council. The involvement of NorthStar, Dr. Rob Davis and Dr. Gary Koester is huge. We wouldn't be as advanced as we are without their input. 2) Have enthused people who want to achieve. You can teach and talk until you are blue in the face and it won't make a difference if you don't have a team that has the desire to achieve. 3) Get a program together with a group of bulls that meet the farm's goals. NorthStar has always been here to help us. When we approached them for help they jumped right in with a program.

Cary Dairy: 1) You have to have good people and let them do their job. Annually we have a farm meeting of everyone involved in our operation. 2) Communication. Monthly or whenever we need to we have committee meetings for specific areas. Part of our success is because everyone wants to do a good job and wants to learn. We never settle for status quo, we are always asking what can we do better. It takes a whole group to make reproduction work well. It starts back at freshening and everything good or bad contributes to reproduction. 3) Consistency and timing of shots is very important.



Cary Dairy Farm is located in Battle Creek, Michigan and is owned by Steve Cary. The 834-cow herd has a three-times-a-day milk average of 29,986 pounds and a pregnancy rate of 28 percent. The farm's reproduction team includes: Pedro Vicente, Jose Ortiz, Maria Ortiz, and Paulino Sanchez, all from Cherán Michoacán, Mexico, as well as Dave Schroder and Steve Cary. Outside professional team members include: Dr. Rob Davis, Progressive Dairy Management, Dr. Thompson, Team Management Concepts, as well as Ed Nichols, Sales Representative and Julie Ainsworth, Dairy Records Analyst with NorthStar Cooperative.

What roles do outside professionals play in your reproductive program?

Autumn Vista: They (Julie Ainsworth and Dr. Gary Koester) have been the backbone of our reproduction program. They are very educated in every aspect of their job and their experience helps us. There's a lot at stake here to try to fly alone. Having wise counsel, who are specialists, is very important. We always say we need to get Gary and Julie's blessing before we make a change.

Cary Dairy: We have a good support team all the way around with Ed and Julie (NorthStar), Dr. Rob Davis and Dr. Thompson. We wouldn't want to take any one of them out of the equation. Without NorthStar's help it's not as productive. NorthStar is a part of the team. Our nutritionist is sometimes amazed at why the production is where it's at. Ed works with Jose, Maria and Pedro. He's only a phone call away and he's always there to help out. During these difficult economic times Ed's looking out for the producer.

Other thoughts you would like to share?

Autumn Vista: It takes a team effort. Be proactive. We've been doing weekly team meetings for about a year. It was hard to get started, but they are valuable. We have a standing appointment each week for our meetings, but we do stay flexible. Communication is especially key through expansion. Consequences are high when protocols aren't followed; make sure everyone is properly trained.

Cary Dairy: We have people that are dedicated to making it happen. They have all taken ownership of the protocol. The understanding and compliance of the protocol is very high. Breeding efficiency is very similar between Jose and Paulino, who are the two people that do most of the breeding. Ed and Julie (NorthStar) are part of the team. They treat it (Cary Dairy) like it's their own so they help make good decisions. ★