

# River Ridge Dairy named Progressive Dairy Producer of the Year

Nicole Mackinder

**There comes a time in any leadership** position when no matter how hard you try, you just can't do it all. After managing River Ridge Dairy for over 15 years and watching the herd double in size, Roger Breen knew something had to give. Unable to single handedly take care of the dairy, he decided to hire an assistant to help manage the 1,000 cow herd. That decision, combined with a teamwork environment has certainly paid off for the Coopersville, Michigan dairy as milk production has increased nearly 9,500 pounds in the last five years. This increase contributed to a dollar value increase of \$1,204, which earned River Ridge Dairy the 2006 NorthStar Cooperative Progressive Dairy Producer of the Year award.

Since 2001 the River Ridge herd has increased milk production by an astounding 9,416 pounds of milk, 394 pounds of fat and 286 pounds of protein, increasing their dollar value by \$1,204.

Currently the Holstein herd boasts a rolling herd average on three-time-a-day milking of 28,678 pounds of milk, 1,095 pounds of fat, 852 pounds of protein and a \$3,480 dollar value.

Three years ago, and at the end of his rope, Breen had no idea how hiring Fernando Vazquez, a certified veterinarian from Mexico, would change the face of River Ridge. "I had so much that needed to be done but couldn't find anyone I could depend on," remembers Breen. "Hiring Fernando was just what we needed."

More than extra help with daily responsibilities, Vazquez brought management ideas to the farm, making a huge difference in improving overall herd health and production. "One of the first things Fernando did was change the groups," points out Breen. "Cows are now grouped not only by days in milk as before, but also by lactation. That change

has made a big difference because we don't have to sort as much and that is so much less stress for the cows and us!"

Besides regrouping, the ration was also reformulated. Dry hay was added to the entire ration, as well as brown mid-rib (bMR) corn to the silage. Within 60 days of adding bMR corn, milk production increased 4.8 pounds per cow.

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**- Roger Breen**

to the progressive puzzle at River Ridge, they aren't the only management improvements that have paved the way for production increases. Wanting to increase the herd's genetic potential, in 2000 River Ridge decided to switch from breeding with a herd bull to artificial insemination.

"We needed to work on feet, legs and udders," recalls Breen. "Of course changes like that take a while to have an impact on the herd, so it's not like milk production improved overnight, but the improvements are obvious now when you look at our production records and the cows themselves."

Herd health has always been a priority at River Ridge and a calf mortality rate of less than one percent proves that calf raisers Dave Deweese and Jim Vanhouten don't take their responsibilities lightly. "If it is born alive they will keep it alive," declares Breen. "They give calves a great start and then Fernando takes over. Ev-



Roger Breen, manager; JoEllen Meerman, DHI technician; Fernando Vazquez, herdsman; Dave Deweese and Jim Vanhouten calf raisers.

While regrouping and ration changes are important pieces

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In addition to genetic improvements and herd health, River Ridge has also concentrated on making the herd more comfortable. Stalls were widened from 45 to 48 inches and the brisket board was removed adding lunge space. Additionally, the parlor was expanded to a double-24, two free-stall barns were built and a new fresh cow protocol was implemented separating cows from heifers.

While building enhancements and management changes have set the stage for progress at River Ridge, it is the teamwork of all involved with the dairy that has resulted in success. "It is simple," states Breen. "Everyone here cares and works well as a team. From our DHI technician to our nutritionist to our calf raisers and all our employees combined, it takes everyone working well together. Because we know we can depend on each other, we are not afraid to try new things. Trying new things is the only way to keep improving – and that is what we plan on doing." ★