FARMER INTERVIEW

Century Farm in Central Minnesota Thriving

Dan Martens, University of Minnesota-Extension

Ken Koltes (left) and his two sons, Andy (right) and Mike (center), own and operate, Koltes Dairy LLC, a Century Farm dating back to 1910. Koltes Dairy is located south of St. Joseph, MN, near St. Cloud.

Ken milked 60 cows as his main farm enterprise for 30 years. He quit milking, four years before Andy and Mike came back to the farm to relaunch their farming and dairy efforts in 2010. Andy and Mike brought their own skills, ideas, and energy to the farm and are building on the expertise and experience Ken gained through the years.

Currently, Koltes Dairy includes 130 milk cows and about 140 growing heifers with a 26,000 lb rolling herd average. The herd currently gets a total mixed ration (TMR) with about 56 lbs of corn silage, 18 lbs of alfalfa baleage, 10 lbs of corn, 8.5 lbs of protein and other supplements, and 3 lbs of roasted soybeans. As on other dairy farms, the right mix of forages is what makes things work. Koltes work with a nutrition consultant who aligns well with their priorities.

Their cropland includes 370 tillable acres: 45 acres of soybeans for roasting, 85 acres of corn silage, 85 acres of corn grain, and 155 acres of alfalfa. They save significant dollars on their feed bill with roasted soybeans.

Thirty acres are seeded to pasture for 75 heifers ranging from 700 to 1,400 lbs. The pasture is divided into 15 paddocks. These heifers get corn silage to maintain growth goals. The pasture is orchard and brome grass with about 20% red clover. It is over-seeded with 4 lbs of red clover each year. Results depend on rain. Forty-five pounds of nitrogen in urea is applied twice a year with Agrotain. The pasture also responds well to manure.

Koltes Dairy picks a high yield 105 day maturity grain corn variety for silage. Good grain content is a key to good milk production for them. They watch milk line and chopped samples are tested to monitor whole plant moisture for chopping decisions, chopping at 18˝ for better quality. Their goal would be 67% moisture, but they can't run quite that wet in the two silos and three bags they typically fill. A bacterial inoculant helps to maintain more uniform quality; and they plan to try out a silage bag vent they saw at the local summer forage field day event.

Ken chopped haylage during his milking years. However, they have switched to baleage because it allows them to finish in half the time and it fits their work schedule better. Alfalfa is cut and put in a 50˝ swath with a disc mower conditioner. After some drying time, two swaths are combined for baling. The goal is to bale at 50-55% moisture and get hay off the field and wrapped as soon as possible. They have about two days of cutting and two days of baling and wrapping, making use of a neighbor's in-line wrapper.

Koltes watch alfalfa scissors cut information provided by the Central Minnesota Forage Council and County Extension staff for first crop alfalfa. They also use a PEAQ stick while checking fields. Usually, the weather is the key factor. Their goal is to have feed in the bunk at 180-200 relative forage quality (RFQ). They prefer to blend the hay down in quality if they need to, rather than trying to increase the quality of inferior hay. Crop conditions drive the cutting schedule, and they have cut in as little as 21 days. Their round baler has cutting knifes which work well with their TMR mixer.

Koltes manage alfalfa for a 5 ton yield. With ample rainfall in 2016, they sold 25% of their crop as baleage. Lime, boron, sulfur, and potassium are important nutrient considerations, based on soil tests done every other year.

Koltes Dairy finds alfalfa to be the preferred crop for some sandier rented land. In terms of stand life, with suitable weather, they aim for a seeding year and four full seasons on the sand, and a seeding year and three full seasons on their heavier ground. They straight-seed alfalfa and expect to have a first crop with a few weeds and two better cuttings the first year. They have used Select herbicide to control grass weeds and this year are trying Raptor to take out lambsquarter and some other weeds.

Ken is a long-time member of the Central Minnesota Forage Council and the Midwest Forage Association, and looks forward to the Tour de Forage meeting each winter saying, "The speakers are all informative and share ideas that are useful to us to consider implementing on the farm."

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