

Faith, Family Central to Success of Soaring Eagle Dairy

Jim Fitzgerald of Soaring Eagle Dairy in Newton, WI, began his farming career with his parents in 1967 after attending Farm Short Course at UW-Madison. At the time, they were milking 55 cows. In 1969, they expanded and built a double 8 parlor and 140-cow freestall barn. By 1980, two of Jim's brothers had come back to farm as well. This prompted Jim to start a new farm.



Fast forward to today, Soaring Eagle Dairy, operated by Jim and his wife Sandie, farms 1,950 acres (1,365 owned, 585 rented) and milks 1,200 Holsteins three times daily in a double 16 parlor built in 1997. They have been making continued upgrades and improvements to equipment and facilities. Their herd production is currently at 28,850 lbs of milk with 3.82% butterfat and 3.02% protein. They raise calves from birth to 5 months of age onsite, at which time they go to The Heifer Authority in Carr, CO, returning 2 months prior to calving. Soaring Eagle Dairy is one of eight partners in The Heifer Authority.



Jim generally grows ~1,100 acres of corn, 600 acres of alfalfa, 100 acres of wheat, and 150 acres of soybean. Much of their land is clay-based. He started incorporating cover crops and no-till farming 6 years ago. "This program has worked well for us," says Fitzgerald. "The challenge has been no-till manure incorporation. With no-till and cover crops, we can now grow continuous corn, wheat, and soybean on highly erodible land with heavy clay soils. Our previous conservation plan called for 3 years of alfalfa followed by 1 year of corn," Fitzgerald added. "We are at 650 acres in no-till and plan to add more."

Fields going into alfalfa are chisel-plowed in the fall. In spring, one pass is made with a field cultivator, then a second pass with a Great Plains Turbo Max. Fitzgerald plants alfalfa at 16-18 lbs/ac with a 20' no-till, press wheel drill. After experimenting with some grass in alfalfa stands, he is now back to straight alfalfa. "Several years ago, we were able to try some reduced-lignin alfalfa, but we lost the crop to winterkill the year after seeding," said Fitzgerald. "Our crop consultant/agronomist, Steve Hoffman of InDepth Agronomy, has since convinced us that the new varieties are much improved. This year, 100% of our new seedings will be reduced-lignin."

This year his corn silage will be 80% BMR and 20% silage specific varieties. "Our goal is to get back to 100 lbs/cow in milk production after dropping to 92 lbs after having rBST milk removed from our cooperative," Fitzgerald said.

All of Soaring Eagle Dairy's alfalfa is harvested as haylage at 55-65% moisture. "We were typically on a four-cut system, but two of the last four years we were able to take five cuttings. We cut at 28-day intervals and try to make the last cutting before September 10." Fitzgerald cuts his alfalfa with a 30' triple mower (no conditioner) and merges with a 30' merger. He strives to chop 600 acres in 2-3 days. Use of an alfalfa specific inoculant is part of his haylage program. Alfalfa fields are generally kept 3 years after seeding. He scouts on a weekly basis and crop protection tools are applied as needed for leaf hopper and weevil control.

All fields are soil-tested every 3 years and potash is applied after first and third crops. Fitzgerald also applies 1,000 lbs of gypsum every 4-5 years on his entire acreage, providing a low cost form of sulfur.



“We strive to cut alfalfa every 28 days; however, the weather forecast is the determining factor,” says Fitzgerald. “We look for a 4-day window with optimal conditions from the time we start until the last load comes in. The past several years we’ve had fewer than 100 acres rained on.”

In addition to farming, Jim and Sandie’s faith and family keep them extremely busy and are easily the most important part of their lives. They have 5 children, 10 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren.

Four of the Fitzgerald children have returned to Soaring Eagle Dairy. Kelly and Stacy came back to the farm after attending Farm and Industry Short Course at UW-Madison. They do the majority of the daily herd work. Julie, office manager, parlor manager, and HR person, came back to the farm 10 years ago after working in accounting. Nick has been back for 6 years after working for a large, national insurance company. Nick and Stacy’s husband Jeremy, handle cropping and maintenance.

On February 25, Jim went to Haiti on his 13th mission trip. He has also done two mission trips to Brazil. In addition, the past 3 years he has sent a 40' shipping container to Haiti. A total of 120,200 lbs of medical supplies and equipment, hand and power tools, school desks, hygiene items, school supplies, clothing, powder protein drinks, and more have been delivered thus far. “All of this has been our way to give back for all the gifts God has given us.”

Fitzgerald joined MFA in 2004 and has served on the board 2 terms. He is also a member of PDPW, DBA, Farm Bureau, Eastern WI DHIA, and Lakeshore Farm Management. “MFA membership provides a great value. As a farmer, it gives me the latest news and information on research, agronomics, and economics within the forage industry basically free of charge. Coupons are more than enough to cover MFA's membership fees.”