

The Behnke Farm – A Family Affair

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Doug Behnke was born and raised on his northeast Wisconsin dairy farm just a few miles southwest of Clintonville. A growing interest in dairy cows and crop production was nurtured at home and at school through numerous high school ag classes, FFA, and then through adult education classes with Extension and Fox Valley Technical College.

Doug's career started in partnership with his father in the late '70s and early '80s leading to another partnership with his brother in the '90s following his father's retirement. In 2000, Doug and his wife Mary became sole owners/operators along with their three children Katie, Christa, and Kellie. Today, Kellie is the farm agronomist/nutrient manager with her husband, Ryan Zahn, also employed on the farm with hopes of part ownership in the next five years.



From L to R: Ryan Zahn, Kellie Zahn, Mary Behnke, and Doug Behnke.

Behnke's farm covers 1,100 acres – 900 cropland (200 rented) with another 200 acres in forestland and swamp. The dairy herd includes 340 cows, plus replacement heifers. They also feed out ~60 Holstein steers. Cows are milked twice each day in a 20-stall rotary parlor with RHA of 25,000 lbs/cow, 3.15% protein, and 4.0% fat.

The 900 acres of cropland is mainly Hortonville soil with 250 acres of established alfalfa and 100 acres of new seeding, 450 acres of corn (200 acres corn silage) and ~100 acres of soybeans. Their 5- to 6-year rotation includes alfalfa 3 years, corn 1-2 years, and soybeans 1 year; routine soil tests are collected every 3-4 years.

Most alfalfa is spring-seeded using a Brillion seeder at 15-17 lbs/ac (Dairyland Seed varieties) with 1-1.5 bu of oats for erosion control and heifer feed. Prior to seeding, 10,000-15,000 gallons of liquid manure are also applied followed by a chisel plow and field cultivator to help prepare a good seedbed. If weed control is necessary, newly seeded alfalfa is sprayed after oats are harvested. Leafhopper pressure is also monitored and controlled when economic thresholds dictate. Potash levels are maintained with 300 lbs/ac K₂O after first crop.

Established alfalfa fields are harvested 4-5 times each year with the last cutting in early September, or October for older stands. Stand counts are used to determine when to rotate to corn, or after a third full production year. Doug recommends growing alfalfa on your best land and being prepared to harvest when weather allows.

A self-propelled mower and chopper, with a merger in between, are used to harvest alfalfa. Some second- and third-crop alfalfa is baled (3'x3'x8', no wrap). Inoculant is used on haylage and sometimes when baling. Established stands yield 3.5-7 TDM/ac with 800-1,500 total tons of alfalfa DM produced each year and fed on farm. All haylage is stored in Harvestore silos to help reduce stored feed loss. Silos also provide a covered feed center sheltered from rain and snow.



Doug has been a member of the Waupaca County Forage Council (WCFC) from the very beginning, and participated in the local Green/Gold contest. The Behnke farm has hosted several local forage council field days and participated in numerous forage field research and demonstration projects with University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension. Doug also served on the local WCFC Board several times, including as President, and served as a Director on the MFA Board from 2009-2015.

Doug believes the value of his MFA/local Forage Council membership offers a huge return on investment, especially as a milk and dairy beef farmer. MFA membership resources like the *Forage Focus* magazine and *Clippings* help the Behnkes' stay current on the latest forage production and management practices right here in the Upper Midwest, not to mention the membership coupons more than cover the annual dues.

Doug has been recognized for his forage production and leadership roles with the WCFC Pacesetter Award. It's hard to believe Doug has time for additional leadership roles, like Bear Creek Town Chair, Trinity Lutheran Church Treasurer, Clintonville FFA Alumni President, milk marketing cooperative delegate, and recent past-president of the Fox Valley Farm Management Association.



Behnkes' barn quilt.