

A Family Tradition: The Rach Farm

by Matthew Digman, University of Wisconsin

In the farming community, along the east side of Lake Winnebago, reside producers and Midwest Forage Association members Ken and Mary Rach. On their 430-acre farm in northeastern Wisconsin, just outside of Chilton, they milk 60 cows. Chilton is located directly east of Oshkosh, across lake Winnebago.

Ken's father Melvin Rach purchased the farm after returning from military service. At that time, the farm supported 25 milk cows on 80 acres of land. In 1961, Melvin bought the neighbor's farm, adding another 80 acres to the operation.

Melvin's son, Ken, joined the farm in 1975. During his first 3 years, Ken worked for his father, acquiring the farm's machinery and cattle. Mary and Ken were married in 1979 and the two bought Melvin's farms in 1980. Ken and Mary continued to expand the farm, purchasing 80 acre parcels in 1990, 2000, and recently, an additional 50 acres. Their milking herd has expanded, too. Currently, the Rachs milk 60 cows with a herd average of 26,000 lbs, in addition to raising replacements.

The 430 acre Rach farm yields a bit more feed than their cattle can eat. Therefore, the Rachs sell their excess alfalfa, winter wheat and corn to neighboring dairies. This provides a nice supplementary income to their dairy.

When it comes to planting and harvesting, the Rachs use a variety of machinery. Alfalfa is established by direct seeding using a 30' John Deere grain drill equipped with press wheels. The seed is metered through the large grain tank and placed using double disk openers before being firmly pressed by the following press wheels. This arrangement ensures the seed is placed at $\frac{1}{4}$ " with good soil contact, which is essential to seed germination in the dry springs which are often experienced here.

According to Ken, "The Brillion seeder does great if the conditions are right." That is, if the rain comes in time. The seedbed is prepared in the fall with a 10" deep pass from their 12' disk chisel plow followed in the spring by 2 passes of a 40' field cultivator. Alfalfa not harvested for the dairy is sold standing in the field to Holsum Dairy. The price is determined by yield, corrected to 13% moisture content.

Corn is established with the same tillage regime, but with only a single pass of the field cultivator. The Rachs plant corn silage and corn grain at 35,000 and 32,000 plants/ac, respectively. Their 12-row planter employs row cleaners and a 20/20 Seedsense monitor with 3 row-units reporting down force. "The system works great. You don't always have to change the down-force, but it's nice to know," says Ken.

Most of the nutrient requirements for the crops come from the manure returned from the Holsum Dairy. Additional manure fertilizer is purchased at 50% of the nutrient value. The only ground not to receive manure is the wheat ground, due to the nitrogen required. Manure is surface-applied and immediately incorporated using an offset disk.

Ken and Mary store their forage in upright silos and silo bags. Recently, they upgraded their bagging area with a gravel pad. The pad has a 3" thick base of breaker run followed by $\frac{3}{4}$ " gravel with a top layer of screenings. The pad provides a good base for unloading the bags, but more importantly it has greatly reduced the rodent damage. Ken points out that this is especially important if you want to keep the bags for extended periods of time.

Ken does all of his feeding via his upright silos. This requires him to transfer silage from his bags to the silos. He does this in one day by parking a cut-off wagon at the blower. The wagon is fed from the bags via an end-loader. The system simplifies feeding without loss in forage quality.

The biggest challenge this season is the rainy weather. Ken reports 8" of total rainfall in June and 16.2" in July. This is the wettest season since 1996, the year he began recording rainfall totals. As most farmers are looking forward to more consistent rainfall and a bountiful growing season, here's to the successful future of the Rach farm!

