

Family & Forage Drive Redtail Ridge Dairy

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The story isn't unique. Father purchases a dairy farm in the early 1960's. Modest improvements are made through the years as weather and economic crises are averted. A son eventually takes over the operation and raises his own family. In the early 2000's the decision is made to expand and modernize.

At this point in the story there is a divergence from normal in terms of success and family integration, both of which are readily apparent the minute you step foot on the farm.

Redtail Ridge Dairy sits among the rolling hills of northeast Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. Joe and Diane Thome own, manage, and oversee the operation and its 23 employees. Joe's brother, John, also is a part-owner and is lead herdsman.

Joe and Diane raised four children on the farm; they all are currently involved in the operation to some degree. Lindsay and Tyler are full-time employees, Jessica works for a farm management firm and does the farm's tax preparations, and Liz currently works part-time on the farm and has recently attended UW-Madison's Farm Short Course program. Diane and Lindsay oversee most of the office work.

Many of the farm's employees are also long-term members of the greater farm family. It's readily apparent that all have an interest in the success of the farm.



Some key members of the Redtail Ridge forage production team



Daughter Lindsay at work in the office

When the operation modernized to a freestall-parlor operation in 2002, herd size jumped from 70 to 400 cows. Today, the 1,200 cow dairy touts a rolling herd average of over 30,000 pounds of milk. Joe attributes the herd's high production to high yields of quality forage, attention to cow comfort, using good dairy genetics, and maintaining high quality milk.

The Thome's have worked with the same nutrition consultant for nearly 30 years to help formulate the dairy ration. They feed a 60% forage ration. About 65% of the forage component is corn silage with the remainder being alfalfa.

The 1,900 acres (1,400 owned) cropped by Redtail Ridge is almost exclusively used to produce corn silage and alfalfa. The farm maintains ~700 alfalfa acres that is established with a John Deere 20' no-till drill. Alfalfa follows corn or the 100 acres of wheat that is grown annually. Wheat is grown to help provide soil cover on highly erodible fields and to supply straw for feed and bedding. The direct-seeded alfalfa stands are usually cut three times in the seeding year.

Established alfalfa fields receive annual applications of potash, sulfur, and boron. For third- and fourth-year alfalfa stands, liquid manure is applied after second or third cutting. Joe is vigilant about potato leafhopper control. Most fields are sprayed following the first, second, and third cuttings.

Alfalfa fields are cut using a 32' Pottinger triple swath disc mower with conditioners. Swaths are combined using two 35' mergers. The 775 HP Claas harvester chops into wagons equipped with flotation tires to reduce field damage. One truck also has flotation tires. Redtail Ridge annually plants ~1,100 acres of corn. Depending on the year, either all or most of this acreage is chopped for silage. This year a new 24-row planter was purchased; corn is planted in 20" rows at the rate of 38,000 seeds per acre.

Dual-purpose hybrids are selected to maximize starch content and leave the option open for grain harvest as silage inventories dictate. Cutting height is adjusted as needed to ensure good feed quality. Liquid manure, along with supplemental commercial fertilizer purchases, help feed the corn silage crop.

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In addition to alfalfa and corn silage, the farm also double-crops about 60 acres of winter rye following a corn silage harvest. The forage rye is harvested in the spring and fields are planted back to corn. Finally, if weather conditions allow, 120 acres of reed canarygrass marsh is harvested for heifer ration utilization. All young stock are raised on the farm.

Forage is stored in covered piles on an asphalt pad. Pile face management is important and the farm has used a silage facer for about ten years. Joe and daughter Lindsay are generally assigned the pile packing duties using two articulate 4WD tractors.

Joe often points to the importance of maintaining an adequate inventory of forage. He strives to have a three month carryover of haylage and a four month carryover of corn silage. This strategy paid big dividends in the drought year of 2012 and the following spring when the area suffered from significant alfalfa winterkill.

It would be an understatement to say the Redtail Ridge operation has been involved in the Fond du Lac County Forage Council and has been an MFA member since its inception. Joe is a past board member. The same can be said for full-time employee Mike Costello. Currently, Mike's nephew and another full-time farm employee, Dan Costello, serves on the board. For many years the farm has served as one of the base locations for providing alfalfa scissors-cut program samples. Further, Redtail Ridge Dairy has maintained at least one field in the Wisconsin Alfalfa Yield and Persistence Project since 2007.

Redtail Ridge Dairy is a model for modern dairy production. Family involvement, great employees, timely field operations, attention to detail, and a close eye on new methods and economics will no doubt ensure that past success will continue in the years to come.