Information and Technology - Key to Schefers Dairy

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yle and Becky Schefers make use of reliable information and advancing technology to manage Schefers Dairy near St. Stephen in Stearns County, Minnesota. Lyle manages the crop enterprises to provide quality forage and grain for the dairy herd including ~500 acres of alfalfa, ~500 acres of corn silage, ~200 acres of grass hay, and ~400 acres of corn grain. Becky manages the 500 cow dairy herd and growing heifers to make effective use of quality forages and other resources. Becky's expertise with feed is key to making decisions about their forage crops.



Schefers rely on each other along with skilled and dedicated employees, and knowledgeable advisors for seed, fertilizer, nutrition, credit, farm management, crop consulting, equipment, and other inputs.

Alfalfa. They select alfalfa varieties that hold quality through a wide harvest window. Currently, Dairyland 3400 is a favorite. They expect a 5-7 day harvest window and have a goal of 160-180 RFV haylage, giving them flexibility with rations.

Alfalfa is planted with a companion crop of oats or barley with peas. The companion crop is harvested when the peas have filled well and the grain has headed. This forage usually tests ~130 RFV. For fields under irrigation, they apply 28% nitrogen and gain 6-8" of growth. They harvest 4.5 ton of wet haylage material and get 2 more alfalfa cuttings. Lyle figures they get more total feed in the seeding year and reduce weed issues and chemical weed control cost.

Three years ago, Lyle started applying a portion of fertilizer after each cutting. They used to apply fertilizer in spring and fall, but found heavy spring rains would sometimes leave the crop short of nutrients through the growing season. Alfalfa is rotated on a 4-7 year rotation; preferring to stay on the shorter end of that range. He grows alfalfa on some rented land where edible beans or potatoes are grown; this shortens the rotation so he occasionally keeps other fields longer to maintain total acress needed.

Corn Silage. Lyle works with Scott Heilig, Dairyland Seed, to pick varieties ranking well in milk per acre. The goal is to make the best use of every acre. He does not use BMR traits or silage specific hybrids because he farms a variety of soil types and needs flexibility between grain and silage among all fields. Varieties range 80-110 days with most at 98-102 days. Lyle figures longer day varieties have a longer pollination window and give him more flexibility with his custom harvesting – aiming to make customer needs a priority.

The goal is to chop corn at 60-62% moisture. This moisture range gives them versatility in how they use corn silage in rations. Feed that is too wet can cause problems. Moisture can be added to TMR rations to help bind ingredients and prevent sorting, but it's difficult to take moisture out.

Kernel processing helps the Schefers do well with drier corn silage. They have worked through the gamut from choppers without processing, to roller type processors, then shredlage, and now the John Deere Kernel Star Processor. The Schefers figure they gained milk with the first two processors. They are not sure whether they will gain milk with the Kernel Star processor; but are hoping to gain cow health improvements as they increase cutting length. They have been chopping corn silage at ½" and are now going to ¾", and chopping haylage at ~¾" to get longer fiber. They are not feeding long stem hay to milk cows.

Bagged Storage. For Schefers, bagged haylage and corn silage makes the cow's meal planning a little bit like going to the pantry and picking ingredients from the shelf. Becky has developed a system for marking bags with harvest date, field location, moisture, and other information helpful for making feed decisions. Green paint is used for haylage and red for corn silage. They test feed with their nutrition advisor to make sure they are on the right track.

The yield, moisture, and quality monitor on their chopper provides on-the-go information for marking bags and keeping feed inventory records. Yield and feed quality data can also be used to evaluate the crop production side of the farm. Yield and feed inventory can be cross checked between field and feed records based on TMR weights and forage feed lab work.

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Inoculants are used on all haylage and not as much on corn silage. Fermentation and storage dry matter and quality losses are real, but difficult to see. Inoculants are a minimal investment to assure a quick and thorough fermentation process.

Valuable Manure Resources. It's important to make the best use of manure resources. Schefers keep liquid manure close to home since it is expensive to haul. Some bedding pack manure gets hauled 10-12 miles with dump trucks. Their goal is to spread manure uniformly and to get the manure tilled in as soon as possible to minimize nitrogen losses. Baled corn stalks are used for feed and bedding, and bedded pack manure is applied on fields where stalks are removed.

The Schefers raise crops on owned and rented land and consider their landlords a part of their operation. They want landowners to understand how information and technology helps them take care of the land as a benefit to the landowner as well as for them.

Doing custom work allows Schefers Dairy to afford to make use of technology on newer equipment. Lyle values the opportunity to compare ideas and experiences with farming customers.

Lyle works with his primary seed supplier to run on-farm variety trials for corn each year, evaluating varieties for grain and corn silage purposes. This serves him well in selling seed as well as collecting data and making field observations on his own farm. He has also cooperated with alfalfa variety trials.

Lyle says with technology and information, it is important to follow through with doing things right. Do not take shortcuts limiting the value of these resources. He puts it this way, "You wouldn't buy a new car and put bald tires on it." Lyle and Becky believe in order to feed the growing population, while keeping sustainable farming practices, profitability, and life on the farm... it is important to look for better ways to do things.