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Who: Delvyn Martin, owner-operator

What: Creekside Dairy

Where: Sparta, WI

Some 22 years ago, the Martin family came west out of Pennsylvania to expand their dairy operation near Sparta, Wisconsin. In 2008, the family's risk taker, young Delvyn Martin, bought an older dairy farm kitty-corner to his parents' operation.



Delvyn Martin

The new farm became Creekside Dairy, where Delvyn experiments with making his modest-size Holstein operation as efficient as possible. The farm features what Delvyn calls "smart technology" – not high-tech for its own sake, but for how quickly it pays back in his operation.

Despite Creekside's technology investment, there's still plenty of handwork to do. Delvyn

expects to keep his four sons busy. The oldest is 10 years old.

"Currently, we're milking 85 cows housed in a 100-cow tie-stall barn," Delvyn says. "We reduced our number at the right time, considering the lower milk prices this year and the challenge of getting good hired help. Now we're working on getting as efficient as possible with the number of cows we have and our current two-times-per-day milking schedule."

Producer Spotlight

Efficiency first, then be ready to grow

Smart technology is playing a big part, such that Delvyn says his operation is more like the small, but tech-savvy dairy farms found in Ontario in contrast to comparable farms in Wisconsin. For example, Delvyn's computerized milking system provides individual cow production tracking on a daily basis.

"It means I can look at each cow's output every day and get a good sense of her normal performance," Delvyn says. "So, if she's off a bit one day, I know I need to pay a little extra attention."

"The new technology lets me make decisions day by day, calmly, rather than making decisions once a month. I have daily measurements, which naturally shift from day to day, depending on all sorts of things. But this daily data gives me a better picture of how a cow is doing, rather than using just a snapshot of her data from a single test day."

Delvyn admits, however, such technology requires a bit of maintenance.

"It's hands-on work," he says, "which means I need at least one part-time hired hand."

That's one of the big challenges of a smaller operation, he adds. It's tough to find good people – even in a state and region with a lot of good dairy talent. Creekside Dairy pays a good wage, but adding health insurance and other benefits increases labor costs greatly.

Cow comfort is a priority, Delvyn says. Although his tie-stall barn is not ideal compared with current free stalls, the barn is updated to provide good cow comfort. About half the stalls have sand bedding and the rest have good mattresses.

"Cows do prefer the sand," Delvyn says, "and the hoof trimmer says you can see the benefit in their softer hooves, too."

Creekside Dairy grows almost all its own forage, including corn (140 acres) and alfalfa (60 acres), with some hay brought in from Manitoba. This year is the first Delvyn is storing corn silage in drive-over piles, which is going to require a new packing tractor to ensure the best quality feedstuffs in storage. Alfalfa haylage is stored in bags and an upright silo.

Delvyn replaced the farm's previous stationary mixer with a portable TMR mixer. Then Mitch Deimund with Diamond V performed Creekside's first TMR Audit®.

"Mitch gave me a pretty long 'to do' list," Delvyn says. "But he prioritized it, so we could get returns from low-cost improvements right away."

Close contact with Diamond V's Jim Livingston, whom Delvyn knew from Jim's work with Quality Liquid Feeds, and Purina's Mike Fuller give Creekside Dairy access to a wide range of dairy production and cow health expertise.

And Delvyn's dad is just down the road a bit, with decades of Pennsylvania dairy experience. There is a bit of friendly competition, Delvyn admits.

"He's one of the best," Delvyn says, "But I'm quicker to try new things and be the family's guinea pig."

You can bet that Delvyn's boys are going to learn the best from both generations.



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