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Dairy/Livestock

Brothers add robotic system to Illinois dairy

By **DEBORAH GERTZ HUSAR**
The Quincy Herald-Whig

CARTHAGE, Ill. (AP) — The cows are lining up to be milked at Udder Hill Dairy south of Carthage.

But it is a robot, not a farmer, who will do the milking as the cows crunch on feed pellets.

Brothers Sid and Nate Huls installed the robotic system in December as a way to deal with the dairy's time and labor demands — and with an eye toward the future.

"It's the future of farming, I guess, if the family wants to stay in business and still go to ballgames and whatever," Sid said. "We're not tied down to the farm near as much."

Twice-daily milkings and chores, starting at 3:30 a.m. and 3 p.m., used to take four hours each for the brothers, one full-time employee and three part-time employees. With the new system and its three robotic units capable of handling 60 cows, "somebody still has to come through and do chores, but it should go from four hours morning and night to roughly one hour," Sid said.

The brothers remain on call 24 hours a day in case of any issues with the computerized equipment, which shuts down for 30 minutes twice a day for cleaning, but for the rest of the time is milking cows or waiting for cows to come in to be milked.

"The machines don't let us expand cow numbers at all, but let us add a milking per day with the same amount of labor," Nate said.

Robotic milking takes an average of 6 minutes, 48 seconds per cow — and it's done on demand.

'It's their choice'

"If they want to come in and milk five times a day, it's their choice. We do try to make a minimum of two milkings per day, and right now we average just a little over three milkings a day," Sid said.

Part of the new system's appeal for the cows is the feed pellets released during the milking process.

"It doesn't dump them all at once," Sid said. "It gives her a little at a time to keep her busy."

The amount of pellets varies from cow to cow based on their production, which "makes it more efficient feeding," Sid said. "Before we'd feed basically the whole herd as one individual cow. Now we're getting what she needs. It's specialized."

Even more impressive than the time and labor savings is the technology involved.

Collars with computer chips allow the robot to recognize each of the herd's 160 milking cows and her unique teat placement.

The robotic arm scrubs the cow's teats twice before attaching the milking equipment, tracks milk flow, removes teat cups as needed to prevent overmilking and sanitizes the milking equipment after each milking.

"If the cow moves forward or back, the arm moves with her. It's like a slow dance all the time," Nate said. "If you let it work, it's usually smart enough to fix itself."

'Fitbit on a cow'

The computer measures the cow's temperature and records daily milk production, feed intake and activity including how much the cow chews its cud.

"Basically it's a Fitbit on a cow. It tracks her movement every day," Sid said, referring to the popular wearable activity tracker for people. "It's like an information overload. It's so much more information than we ever had before."

Newer features of robotic milking systems "catch" cows in heat or signaling illness, then open a gate to move those animals into a separate management pen. "Over time it helps with herd health management, to catch cows with sickness before they're actually showing physical signs," Sid's wife, Kristin, said.

The brothers and their employees still have daily chores, starting with the "fetch list" supplied each morning by the computer — a list of those cows that haven't milked in eight hours or more. They hose down barn floors, change milk filters daily, check the herd, bottle feed calves and feed the milking cows and young stock.

Maintaining young stock is key to the dairy operation.

"Our goal is to raise our own from the time they're born," Kristin said. "There's less risk of introducing health issues into the herd. You know your genetics."

Robotic milking systems have been used in other countries for nearly two decades, but have been in use in the United States only for about six years. Already using technology like GPS to raise corn and soybeans, the brothers said adding it to the dairy was the next step — even if it was something their dad, Lloyd, never expected to see.

'A long time ago'

"I started when I was six years old with a T-handled milk stool and a three-gallon stainless steel pail milking cows by hand. That was a long time ago," Lloyd said. "I'm not computer literate, and I won't say it's the thing of the future, but it's definitely a labor saver, herd improvement-type thing."

Planning for the system began in July with research and visits to farms already using similar equipment. Work on a new barn to house the robots began the day after Labor Day, and they were milking robotically by Dec. 7.

Big adjustments

"Our goal when we started was to have it pretty self-sufficient when we got back into the field" this spring, Nate said.

The first three weeks meant plenty of adjustment for humans and herd.

"Like the cows are learning it, we're learning it," Nate said.

"For the first week, we had to help each cow, coax them to get into the machine. Once they learned the system, they caught on fast," Sid said. "The first time a new cow would come in, we had to get the (robotic) arm in the right position to help it find the first milking."

Launching the system in the winter when cows are most comfortable made sense, but the brothers hit a bitter cold snap that stressed both them and the herd just after switching to the new Lely units built in Pella, Iowa.

Cow comfort

"Any dairy farmer will tell you their No. 1 goal is cow comfort," Kristin said.

"The more comfortable the cows are, the higher they'll produce."

Glanbia announces joint venture for Michigan plant

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

Glanbia has announced that it is in advanced discussions with the Dairy Farmers of America, Michigan Milk Producers Association and Foremost Farms to create a stand-alone joint venture to build and operate a new cheese and whey facility in Michigan.

Upon completion, the plant is projected to process 8 million pounds of milk per day.

Under the proposal, Glan-

bia would own half of the venture and the other half would be owned by DFA, MMPA and Foremost Farms.

As part of the proposed joint venture DFA, MMPA and Foremost Farms would supply all milk required by the plant, while Glanbia would have full responsibility for all commercial, technical and operational aspects of the business.

If the project proceeds as planned, commissioning of the new facility is expected to take place in the second half of 2019.

"This proposed joint venture is a strategic move by all the partners to benefit from the growing, large-scale milk pool in the state of Michigan," Brian Phelan, CEO of Glanbia Nutritionals, said in the press release.

"Consistent with Glanbia's growth strategy, this proposed venture will build on our position as the number one producer of American-style cheddar cheese and simultaneously expand our global position as a supplier of advanced technology whey protein to the nutritional sector," he stated.



Lori Potter/The Daily Hub via AP

Alma sale barn manager Matthew Hegamen stands in the sale ring where Tuesday cattle sales that had been suspended in March were restarted under local ownership. Alma Commission Company soon will become Alma Livestock Auction LLC and operate similar to a co-op, according to the steering committee president.

Investors save historic livestock sales barn

By **LORI POTTER**
Kearney Hub

ALMA, Neb. (AP) — A sale barn has been a part of the Alma community for nearly as long as there has been a community.

However, that chain of history was nearly broken a year ago, until a group of local investors stepped forward to purchase the Alma Commission Company and restart Tuesday cattle sales on July 12 that had ended in March, the Kearney Hub reported.

"I'm not sure when it originated. Maybe 100 years," said sale barn steering committee president Terry Kauk of Alma, adding that researching more about Alma's livestock sales history is on the to-do list. "It's been here a long time."

He said a sale barn originally was where the city's Harlan County Lake boat dock is now. The business was along the railroad tracks, before the tracks, barn and other buildings were "moved up the hill" and out of the way of the lake project.

There were several owners along the way, most recently Jim Barta of Norfolk. "That's who we purchased it from," Kauk said, adding that the closing was on May 4.

"Right now, the steering committee and its members own the barn," Kauk said, but the business soon will be

rolled over into a new company, Alma Livestock Auction LLC.

When that change is complete, the business will have a seven-member board for which there already have been nominations submitted.

"It will be producer-owned by the entire group. We haven't reached that benchmark," Kauk said, but the group is getting close. "We'll be getting close to 100 when it's done."

"We know we need to do some pen work, but the general appearance is pretty good. We have to get the business model completed and then we can get working."

Terry Kauk, sale barn steering committee president

He added that the limited liability company will be operated similar to a co-op, with patronage dividends and votes weighted based on investment in the company.

Steering committee treasurer Dená Dunsie of Republican City said the goal is \$350,000 of investment. She and her husband, Nate, have a cow-calf business and do some backgrounding.

"We're going to put some money into it, obviously," Kauk said, when asked about building improvements. Work has started with a new computer system and office remodeling.

"Structurewise, it's fair. We know we need to do some pen work, but the general appearance is pretty good," he continued. "We have to get

the business model completed and then we can get working," Kauk said employee safety is a priority.

The effort to purchase and restart a livestock market that had seen dwindling sales in recent years began with two public information meetings in January 2016. Kauk said the 100 people who attended each meeting understood that saving the business was good for the community, the employees and agriculture.

Kauk credits its longtime Alma Commission Company employee Brenda Molzahn, who died unexpectedly three weeks ago, as the leader of that effort.

The next step was creating the 13-member steering committee that has representatives from Franklin, Harlan, Phelps and Furnas counties in Nebraska, and Phillips County in Kansas.

Kauk and Alma sale barn manager Matthew Hegamen there used to be livestock markets in Franklin, Oxford, Holdrege and Phillipsburg in addition to Alma. Now the closest regular cattle sales are in Kearney, Lexington, and Norton and Plainville, Kansas.

"I think that was one of Brenda's things. That between Plainville and Kearney is a long stretch," Kauk said.

The Tuesday sale in Alma that start at noon primarily is for cattle, but Hegamen said there are sheep and goat sales on the first Tuesday of every month.

Dairy Markets

Lee Mielke



Cheese traders create whiplash

By **LEE MIELKE**
For the Capital Press

Cash cheese traders gave us a little whiplash to start February.

Cheddar block jumped a dime last Thursday, climbing to \$1.85 per pound, only to give back 11 cents Friday, and close at \$1.74, still 5 cents higher on the week and 27 cents above a year ago.

The barrels closed at \$1.7075, up 26 cents on the week, 24 1/4-cents above a year ago, and re-established a more normal 3 1/4-cents below the blocks.

Three cars of block were sold on the week and 23 of barrel.

The blocks dropped 4 cents Monday, as traders awaited Tuesday morning's Global Dairy Trade auction and, not liking what they saw, took the blocks down 7 cents Tuesday to \$1.63.

The barrels inched up a quarter-cent Monday but lost a penny Tuesday, slipping to \$1.70, an inverted 7 cents above the blocks.

After weeks of varying spot milk availability, Midwestern cheese producers reported readily available milk last week, says Dairy Market News, but less of it. Cheese demand is varied and the market undertone is uncertain as some contacts are taking a wait-and-see approach regarding international trade.

Spot butter closed the first Friday of February at \$2.1575 per pound, down 6 1/4-cents on the week, 1 1/4-cents below a year ago, and the lowest price since Dec. 15.

The butter was unchanged Monday and inched up a quarter-cent Tuesday to \$2.16.

DMN says cream is still abundant in the Central region. January was fairly quiet but butter demand is steadily increasing as springtime holiday orders are starting.

Western butter output is steady but inventories are rising.

Spot Grade A nonfat dry milk closed three-quarter cents lower last week, at 94 cents per pound, but 23 cents above a year ago.

The powder was steady Monday but gained a penny Tuesday, hitting 95 cents per pound.

Politics is concerning the market. As per its campaign promises, the Trump administration is taking on the Mexican border issue and trade agreements deemed not advantageous to the U.S. Mexico is one of the U.S. biggest customers for powder.

GDT inches back

Tuesday's Global Dairy Trade auction saw its weighted average for all products offered climb another 1.3 percent, after inching up 0.6 percent Jan. 17, which followed drops of 3.9 percent on Jan. 3 and 0.5 percent Dec. 20.

Buttermilk powder again led the declines, down 7.5 percent. Cheddar cheese was down 3.7 percent, after a 1.3 percent gain last time.

Milk Producers Council's Vandeneuvel moves to California Dairies Inc.

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

The Milk Producers Council has announced a changing of the guard, with long-time general manager Rob Vandeneuvel stepping down.

He will be replaced by Kevin Abernathy, the council's director of regulatory affairs.

Vandeneuvel, who has served at the helm of the

producer organization since 2007, has accepted a position with California Dairies Inc., the largest dairy processing cooperative in the state. He will be CDI's vice president of industry and member relations.

On behalf of MPC, Vandeneuvel has been a vocal proponent of milk pricing reform, calling out the state's secretary of agriculture on many occasions and rail-

ing against what he called a significant discount in California's Class 4b milk price compared with the price for like milk in federal milk marketing orders.

He has voiced strong support for establishing a federal order in California, an effort led by CDI, Dairy Farmers of America and Land O'Lakes.

Abernathy, who has been with MPC five years following seven years as executive

director of the California Dairy Campaign — another dairy farmer trade association — has been promoted to general manager.

He serves as a member of USDA's Agricultural Air Quality Task Force and has served on numerous state and local environmental committees and working groups.

He also served six years as Western states territory manager for Brown Equipment

Co. and holds a degree in animal science from California State University-Fresno.

"While the board of directors has greatly appreciated the work that Rob has done in this industry these past nine-plus years running MPC, we are also excited to be able to hand the reins to Kevin, an accomplished industry leader and valuable member of MPC's staff for the past five years," MPC

Board President Cornell Kasbergen said in Friday's MPC newsletter.

"Kevin has already proven his worth as a huge asset to MPC's membership in his current role, and this promotion will ensure that our members continue to receive the highest quality of service and representation throughout and beyond this organizational transition," Kasbergen said.