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COULEE FLATS DAIRY

Operation keeps growing

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

For the Capital Press

MESA, Wash. — Case VanderMeulen and his team of employees milk 7,000 Holstein cows at the state-of-the-art dairy he built near Mesa, Wash., in 2007.

Case grew up on the family's dairy in Holland, which his brother still runs.

"When my brother took over the family farm, I had to do something different and in 1989 decided to go to the United States," he said.

He found work on a dairy in California, then started out on his own, leasing a 150-cow dairy near Grandview, Wash., in 1991. He leased and eventually bought a larger dairy at Sunnyside and expanded to about 800 cows.

Then in 2001 he bought a second facility, growing his herd to 2,300.

In 2007, he started building his current dairy, in the Coulee Corridor of the Columbia Basin. His team began milking 3,000 head at the new facility in March of 2008.

Today, 7,000 Holstein cows are milked three times a day in the parallel double 50 and double 30 milking parlors.

The dairy is designed beyond even the most stringent environmental standards and is well equipped to care for every animal on site, he said.

The large lined lagoons prevent groundwater pollution and provide a reservoir for the manure to be applied to 1,100 acres of feed crops as irrigation and fertilizer. The dairy grows most of the feed for its cattle.

His son Bouwe helps on the dairy, but is still in high school.

"He likes the dairy but he's only 16, so I don't know if this is what he'll want to do for the rest of his life. We do have some really good employees — about 80 of them," Case said.

All the milk produced by Coulee Flats Dairy goes to the Darigold co-op, of which it is a member.

There are many dairies in the area in part because the region has a good climate for dairying.

"We do part of the farming ourselves, and hire part of it done," Case said.

All replacement heifers are raised on the farm. The males are sold as day-old calves.

"We breed the younger cows with female sexed semen, to raise our replacements, and the rest of the herd we breed with beef semen so those calves are worth more as babies," he said.



Coulee Flats Dairy

Dairyman Case VanderMuelen built the Coulee Flats Dairy in 2007.

This dairy utilizes activity monitors on the cows.

"All the cows have a 'FitBit' that goes around their neck, and tracks their movement," he said. "This system lets us know when a cow isn't feeling well or needs to be bred."

The system also cuts down on the labor required to monitor the cattle and works 24 hours a day. The technology is about 10 years old but still useful, he said.

"It doesn't tell you the cow's temperature but it monitors her activity, how much time she spends eating, chewing her cud, lying down, standing up, etc. You can watch the software and see what's happening in a group, and there is a whole lot of information it can give you," Case said. "If a cow does something a little out of the ordinary, you would know it and will be able to check her more closely."