Ruedinger Farms Benefits from 'Getting Involved'

John Ruedinger knew from an early age farming was in his blood. "I have always wanted to be in agriculture. I started farming right out of high school," Ruedinger said. He has been in the dairy business for 43 years and owns and operates Ruedinger Farms near Van Dyne, WI. "When I started, my parents were milking 40 cows. I purchased 20 cows from my dad's cousin and milked them for 2 years while attending the Farm and Industry Short Course in Madison, WI. After graduation we added on to our tie stall barn and I brought my cows home and formed a partnership with my folks." Ruedinger Farms has come a long way from that humble beginning. Today, Ruedinger Farms manages 1,550 tillable acres, milks 1,500 Holstein cows, and raises 1,400 head of youngstock.

The farm started as a traditional dairy, dairy beef, and cash crop operation. Disaster struck in 1996 when a fire destroyed Ruedinger's stall barn and other livestock buildings. "We lost over 100 head of livestock," he said. "After that, we did a lot of soul-searching about whether or not we wanted to stay in the dairy business. We decided to do so and formed our current business structure of Ruedinger Farms, Inc." They built a 200-stall free stall barn with a double 8 parallel parlor and started a new adventure. "We slowly grew the business over the years to our current 1,500 cow size."

During those years Ruedinger needed to learn to work with employees and develop an operations system; he went through many periods of transition. "We eventually realized the power of building a strong team to make the business successful." Currently, Ruedinger's team includes a dairy manager, veterinarian, nutrition consultant, financial consultant, commodity marketing consultant, and financial lending institution. "We are currently in the midst of another business transition with our daughter and son-in-law, who joined our business two years ago."

Ruedinger houses his 1,500 cows in a sand-bedded, free-stall barn and milks 3 times per day. He was milking in a double 11 parallel parlor but was challenged with the proper milking routine. He remodeled to a double 18 to solve the problem. "The new configuration allows us to be more efficient with the milking and cleaning schedule. With the additional milking space, we'll continue to provide a high-quality milk product for the market." Ruedinger has been selling, on average, 95 lbs of milk/cow/day for the last several years. "On average, our cows produce over 31,000 lbs of milk, with 3.85% butterfat and 3.10% protein per year," Ruedinger added.

The farm grows corn, alfalfa, and soybeans. "We have been averaging about 850 acres of corn for silage, 600 acres of alfalfa including new seeding, and 100 acres of soybeans. But we also purchase about 180 acres of alfalfa and 200 acres of corn silage from local growers."

Ruedinger's current rotation is 4 years alfalfa (including seeding year), then 2-3 years corn depending on soil type and bean rotation. "We keep alfalfa in a 4-year rotation depending on winterkill and new seeding winter survival. We plant alfalfa in the spring and direct seed with no cover crop." Fields are fall chisel-plowed, one pass with a cultivator, one pass with a cultamulcher to firm the seedbed prior to planting with a grain drill. "We've found shallow placement with the seed opener and firming wheel allows for quicker emergence. We then roll the fields after planting."

Soils are tested (every 5 acres) on a 3-year rotation to help manage manure applications and commercial fertilizer purchases. Ruedinger plants Roundup Ready varieties with high disease ratings and winterhardiness for fast regrowth after cutting. "We generally plant at about 18 lbs/ac. Our soil types don't allow consistent seedbed preparation at planting, so we find this rate is appropriate for adequate plant density." His nutrient management plan consists of applying liquid manure at a rate of 20,000-25,000 gallons/ac the year before establishing alfalfa. "This allows higher levels of nutrients prior to planting," said Ruedinger. "In the seeding year we apply 100 lbs of

potash with boron and sulfur, and the remaining years, 300-400 lbs of potash with boron and sulfur in two applications, usually after 1st and 3rd crops."

He prefers pure alfalfa stands creating a high-protein, effective fiber for dairy rations. Over the duration of a typical alfalfa stand, grass and weeds fill in wet field areas without planting something that would lower the pure stand quality. His alfalfa is chopped with a goal of 60-65% moisture and put on a concrete feed area. "We use a progressive pile where we pull back the plastic and layer each crop. We use an inoculant to aid in stability while fermenting and for face preservation during the feeding process." Ruedinger tries to produce 7,000 tons/year of alfalfa haylage with a goal of 8.4 tons/ac wet basis, including new seeding. New seeding is cut twice, once at 3rd crop and then again at 4th crop.

When asked about his biggest management difficulty, the answer was easy – weather. "Trying to manage around weather is a challenge. We can manage mechanical aspects of forage production, but wet springs on our soils make it difficult to establish alfalfa. The later it gets the more weeds there are to control, which is why we use Roundup Ready varieties." His best advice – use high-quality seed matching your soil type and harvest method. "Our custom harvester says our yields are some of the best in the area. I attribute that to having an adequate fertility program and insect control - both are important to high yields and stand longevity."

John Ruedinger is a strong supporter of the Midwest Forage Association. He has been a member since it started in 2004 and serves on the board of directors for MFA and the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance. "These organizations are so important to the success of forage farmers. MFA gives farmers the ability to grow their businesses through access to forage-related research and educational events like the Symposium. This information provides access to the latest technical and production information available to make smart choices in seed selection, disease control, feeding practices, and other management options." Ruedinger adds, "Never be afraid to try new production practices, varieties, or systems that might add value to your business. Sometimes the unexpected outcomes are the most valuable. 'Getting more involved' can add tremendous value to you both personally and professionally."