FARMER INTERVIEW

Minnesota Dairy Farmer Eyeing Transition

James Duban has been farming all of his life, having been born and raised on the same farm he manages and resides at today. "We took over the family farm operation in 1993 from my parents," says Duban. "My wife Kim, along with my sons William (23), Nicholas (20), and Mitchell (18) all share the workload." For close to 30 years, the Dubans have been raising crops and milking cows on their farm near Montgomery, MN. "We run ~330 acres of tilled ground, with 70 owned and the rest rented. We farm ~110 acres of alfalfa, 40 acres of new-seeding alfalfa with a nurse crop, 150 acres of corn (~⅔ of that used as silage), and the rest is low-ground hay, mostly canarygrass."

Duban's alfalfa stands consist mostly of hybrid alfalfa mixed with a grass such as meadow or tall fescue at ~3-4 lbs/ac. "Most of our alfalfa is hybrid alfalfa," says Duban. He is, however, seeding some acres to reduced-lignin alfalfa to study how it works on his various soil types, from heavy yellow clay to loam to peat. His fields range from fairly flat to quite hilly.

Field prep starts with working fields twice with a field cultivator, usually at a 3-4" depth. "I usually seed oats and grass using an old grain drill, but use a Brillion seeder to seed alfalfa at 18-20 lbs/ac. It sounds like a heavy amount, but I get a nice carpet that keeps the dandelions in check throughout the life of the stand." Since Duban uses glyphosate-tolerant corn for his silage, he tends to use conventional seed for his alfalfa plantings.

Duban takes soils tests every three to four years in grids to help him figure out fertility needs prior to planting. "We usually put down potash before seeding and in growing years, topdress potash based on soil test and crop removal, along with boron and sulfur, to help keep the alfalfa healthy and productive. If the weather cooperates, we apply a fungicide to our first cutting at 6-8" of height. Our fungicide application pays its biggest dividends when the first cutting is delayed by weather. The yellowing, rotting, and leaf loss are definitely kept in check." During the growing season, he scouts fields for insects that can do damage to the crop; potato leafhoppers tend to be the biggest threat. If economic thresholds are reached, fields are sprayed to control the pest. Duban uses contour strips on the hillier part of his land to slow water runoff and allow greater infiltration. Additionally, farming on the contour rather than up and down tends to reduce fuel consumption and is easier on equipment. "On one hill they go all the way around and it has been called a race track by some agronomists when looking at aerial photos."

Duban harvests four cuttings per year, usually starting the last week of May and going through the first week of September. He adds, "A few times we have taken a fifth cutting towards the end of October after a good hard-killing frost, depending on need and weather." Most of his alfalfa is chopped, inoculated, and stored in bunkers. His alfalfa is covered with plastic on the sidewalls and top with an oxygen barrier.

Some of his alfalfa acres are baled rather than chopped so Duban can have some dry hay on hand for his calves. "For dry hay, our alfalfa and grass get baled by a custom baler into 3x3' bales and stored under a shelter with no sides to keep it out of the rain. It will hold ~600 bales," says Duban. "We bale all the grass hay and like to bale a few hundred alfalfa bales for the young calves. I buy wheat straw off the field in summer and store it as well."

Duban usually keeps stands for three years after seeding before he takes them out of production. "This works best in our crop rotation with corn. However, sometimes that changes if winterkill occurs, which seems to happen more often than it did 30 years ago, with our warmer winters and the occasional rain shower in January."

When it comes to his corn, Duban cuts it for silage and packs it into bunkers as well. "We hire a custom harvester to chop and pack our corn since it's so much quicker and we don't have to worry about a shortage of labor to get the job done. For a small donation, we've worked out a deal with a local high school club to help us cover our corn silage."

Along with raising crops, the Dubans manage a 165-cow dairy herd. Each cow produces an annual output of 26,000 lbs of milk, 1,100 lbs of fat, and 850 lbs of protein. Duban also feeds out Holstein and Holstein/beef cross steers they started keeping a few years ago.

Looking towards the future, Duban says he will likely transition from a dairy to a beef operation. "At this time, none of the boys are considering taking over the operation, so in a few years we will be selling the dairy cows and going to beef. In the meantime, though, we will be breeding all of our cows to beef bulls, since the sale of spring heifers is not economically feasible at this time. This will give us more flexibility in our daily schedule and more time for vacations."

His current plans are to keep alfalfa in the cropping rotation even after he quits milking. "I like keeping alfalfa in the rotation since it's such a good crop for the environment. It's good for the soil with its deep roots and helps prevent erosion on my hills." Duban adds, "Even if I quit milking, there are a few dairy farms in the area that may be interested in purchasing anything I continue to produce. Otherwise, I'll simply bale it, keep some for the beef animals, and sell the rest."

When it comes to the Midwest Forage Association, Duban appreciates the research and educational opportunities it provides members. "I have been a member of MFA since its inception in 2004. It helps me stay on top of current research and apply what I believe would work for me. The Symposium is a nice getaway for the winter as well. I really enjoy being able to socialize with other farmers and farm-related businesses that exhibit at the show. Even an occasional one-on-one with a speaker is quite educational."