# Cows in School

*by Dennis Cosgrove, University of Wisconsin*

The University of Wisconsin-River Falls (UWRF) is unique in many respects. The 5,500 student university is located in West Central Wisconsin, just 25 miles east of St. Paul, MN. UWRF is well known for its agricultural focus and its nationally recognized College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Science. With 1,200 students it is one of the largest non-land grant programs in the country. Among the students are 450 Animal Science majors with 110 focusing in dairy. This puts the UWRF dairy program among the three largest in the U.S. The college also includes large programs in Crop and Soil Science, Agricultural Engineering, Agricultural Education, Food Science and Horticulture.

All of these programs are supported by two Laboratory Farms. The larger of the two, the Mann Valley Farm, consists of over 400 acres and is located 3 miles west of River Falls. This farm includes a cow/calf herd consisting of 65 Hereford and Hereford/Angus cross cattle, a dairy herd of 80 registered Holstein cows, 60 sows which generate 900 feeder pigs, 200 of which are sold to youth throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota as show pigs, and 65 sheep. A second farm closer to campus includes a herd of 70 horses.

In order to provide forage for this large number of animals, the University grows 125 acres of alfalfa, 75 acres of corn silage and 45 acres of corn grain. In addition, the farm purchases 250 tons of hay. Storage facilities include a 200'x 22'x10' bunker silo used mainly for corn silage. In addition there is a 200'x200' pad used for silage bags. The 9'x200' bags are used for alfalfa haylage. There are also two 50'x16' upright silos. All alfalfa is direct seeded. Alfalfa yields on the highly productive silt loam soils average 5.5 tons DM/ac while corn silage yields average 9 tons DM/ac.

Among the unique aspects of the UWRF Laboratory Farm is a state-of-the-art Dairy Learning Center which opened in Fall of 2007. This $9.3 million dollar facility includes a 200'x40' compost loafing barn with curtain sidewalls. Sawdust is used for the bedded pack. The pack is tilled daily with a small field type cultivator to mix the shavings and manure. This serves to aerate the pack and facilitates the composting process. Periodically, the barn is scraped and the material hauled to a 1.5 acre asphalt pad where it is regularly turned and aerated. Once the composting process is finished, usually 4-5 months, the compost is spread on the crop fields or sold to area customers. This brings in ~$10,000/year in income and represents an opportunity for the farm to interact with its many neighbors. This is particularly important as the farm exists in one of the fastest growing areas of Western Wisconsin.

Laboratory farm director Bill Connelly says, "Customers come for compost but leave with more knowledge and understanding of the Lab Farm and the dairy industry." The Dairy Learning Center also includes a special needs barn for up to 30 cows, a calf barn, a heifer barn with a 150 animal capacity, a hay barn, commodity sheds, feed and machine sheds, and two classrooms.

Another unique aspect of the UWRF Laboratory Farm is the use of Management Intensive Rotational Grazing (MIRG). MIRG is employed in a number of different enterprises. The 65 cow/calf pairs are grazed on 65 ac of mixed pastures divided into 11 separate 5-7 ac paddocks. The herd is moved every 3-5 days, depending on time of year. Last year an additional 35 acres were seeded for dairy heifer grazing. That acreage was divided into 5-7 ac paddocks. Each paddock was seeded to a different pasture grass (smooth bromegrass, orchardgrass, novel entophyte tall fescue, festulolium, meadow bromegrass, perennial ryegrass or meadow fescue).

Half of each paddock was seeded with red clover and half with Kura clover. These pastures also are being used this year for a pasture beef finishing trial involving 10 crossbred and 10 Buelingo steers. Beef steers are provided with just over 1.25 acres for two days, then moved. After the steers have moved through a paddock, the dairy heifers follow. Recent rates of gain for the steers approached 3 lbs/day on the all-pasture diet. Gains for the heifers were 2 lbs/day.

The farm relies heavily on student labor both during the school year and in summer. The farm employs around 40 students during the year including student managers for each of the major farm enterprises. Students work in consultation with faculty to manage each of the operations. “This is a great educational opportunity for these students, as well as a meaningful way to help offset the cost of their education,” Connolly says. The farm also has 7 full-time employees who not only carry out the farm work, but also work closely with faculty, preparing laboratories for many of the colleges classes. Faculty also make use of the farm for research and extension activities. Faculty conduct research and try new things that are passed on to producers and students.

The UWRF College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Science prides itself in being a program that emphasizes the practical, as well as theoretical, aspects of agriculture production. The laboratory farm provides an opportunity for hands-on learning. This is particularly important given the increasing urbanization of the student population. The farm provides a chance for students with little or no farm experience to learn in a supervised, real-life environment. The farms are laboratories in the best sense. In addition to the teaching mission, they also provide numerous tours for school groups, day care centers, organizations or individuals. Anyone interested in visiting should contact Bill Connelly at 715.425.3535.