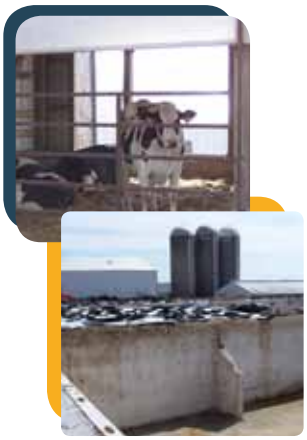
Good Forage Means Good Cows

Jerry Clark, University of Wisconsin



Len-Don Farm near Bloomer, Wisconsin, is a family run operation. With three generations involved in the operation, the farm has set its sights on being around well into the future. Lenny and Donna Seibel (thus Len-Don), sons Ron, Rick, and Ram, Ron's son Tyler (who recently graduated from UW-Stevens Point), and other family members contribute to operating one of the highest producing dairy herds in Chippewa County.

Members of the Midwest Forage Association and the Chippewa Valley Forage Council, Len-Don Farm has used research-based information from the Association and Council to help them make informed decisions. The farm has stressed high quality forage for all cows, heifers, and calves grown on the operation.

Len-Don Farm manages 550 acres, 430 of which they own. Alfalfa is the major component of the dairy herd ration making up ⅔ of the total ration. The remainder consists of corn silage, high moisture shell corn, distiller grains, and roasted soybeans. Ron says they take pride in using all crops grown on the farm for feed in their operation.

Attention to their forage program is a major reason their rolling herd average is over 26,000 lbs milk, 947 lbs fat, and 773 lbs protein for 155 cows. The dairy herd is shuttled between a modern, freestall facility and a stanchion barn for milking. A new open-housed building constructed in November 2010 now serves as home to 120 heifers. The resting area is steeply banked for cleaner, comfortable heifers and easier cleaning of the area. Ron said, "The new shed works great and made cleaning really easy this winter." A new transition barn was also recently constructed to provide fresh cows a comfortable area to calve and transition into the milking herd.

Seibel's strive to keep a crop rotation consisting of two years corn silage and four years alfalfa. This rotation provides them the forage and ration they need to keep the cows producing. On rented and more level fields, they use a corn-soybean rotation to supply the high moisture shell corn and soybeans needed. Alfalfa is seeded at 15 lbs/ac with oats. The oats are taken for grain and used in feed rations for calves and heifers. Tyler says they need the oats mainly for straw to keep the bedding supply stocked. Alfalfa is primarily made into hay silage, although some dry hay is packaged in large square bales. Planting rates for corn vary depending on the end use and soil type. Planting rates for silage corn are around 30,000 seeds/ac with high moisture corn rates slightly lower.

Once forage is harvested, Seibel's focus on forage management and inventory. Their forage storage options include three upright and three bunker silos, but the occasional silo bag is used. The tower and bunker silos are used rotationally between corn and hay silage depending on the quantity of forage being harvested. Three different size bunkers give Len-Don Farm the flexibility to store corn silage or different cuttings of alfalfa. All bunkers are 12' tall and 80' long with widths of 24', 32', and 40'. Ron likes the bunkers from a feedout perspective as it makes feeding easier and faster. Forage moisture is a detail the Seibel's follow closely, especially for corn silage harvest. They regularly participate in whole plant corn silage burn down testing to target harvest dates. With two different types of storage options, Seibel's strive to harvest their corn silage at the proper moisture. Moisture for high moisture shell corn is also tracked closely to ensure a high quality feed is stored in their sealed, upright unit.

Seibel's have always had conservation in mind while growing their operation. Waterways, contour strips, and minimum tillage are all basic components of their cropping system. Farming in the Duncan Creek Watershed, they have been conscious of protecting surface waters. They use liquid manure storage to maximize nutrients from manure by emptying the storage unit and applying manure in spring and fall. The storage unit and nutrient planning allows them to apply manure when risk of runoff is low. Being located near the expanding city of Bloomer, Ron says Len-Don Farm has found it challenging to find land to either expand their operation or spread their manure. The farm continues to make conservation and nutrient management a top priority in their crop plans.

Seibel says, "Promoting a good image of our farm on a daily basis and showing others the importance of agriculture is essential to the sustainability of agriculture."