

Let there be light

Long day lighting boosts production at Seykora Dairy

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BLOOMING PRAIRIE, Minn. - When Brian Seykora drives up to his barn in the morning for chores, light floods from the windows. Although sometimes he wishes the lights were on because someone had arrived to milk the cows for him, Seykora now enjoys his time with the cows even more after putting in a new lighting system.

Nearly a year ago, Seykora installed long day lighting in his 45-cow tie stall barn as a way to boost production and brighten the barn, especially the mangers.

"It's nice because I don't have to look for a switch in the morning," Seykora said. "It's a lot easier to work and it puts you in a better mood to be in a better lit environment."

But the new lighting system doesn't just benefit Seykora, who has been dairy farming 11 years. The lights were installed to help the cows, too. After doing some research, Seykora replaced the incandescent lighting with long day lighting on March 10, 2008.

"Articles I read said it would take about six weeks to see some response," Seykora said. "My rolling herd average was sitting at 27,000 in March and in May it just exploded."

Seykora's RHA increased over 3,000 pounds after the switch.

"It just brought everything together," Seykora said.

The long day lighting uses energy efficient florescent bulbs directly over the mangers. The lights are set on a timer and stay on for 17 hours - turning on at 5 a.m. and shutting off at 10 p.m. Seykora said the barn is a lot brighter.

"The lighting is different when you turn them off, even during the day," Seykora said.

Although the average light intensity is recommended at 15 foot-candles, Seykora averages 25 foot-candles. During preparation he used a computer program to grid out what he needed for lighting and used a light meter to monitor the intensity once they had been installed.

"Cows like consistency," Seykora said. "That's the biggest thing about the lighting - it has to be consistent."

At such a low cost, Seykora said the lighting has been a good investment.

"I was a little skeptical at first," Seykora said. "But I figured if it didn't work at least we could get decent lighting out of the deal."

Because Seykora installed everything himself, the total cost for the new system was \$2,700, with lights costing \$2,000, and wiring and other materials around \$700.



Brian Seykora installed long day lighting in his 45-cow tie stall barn in March 2008. After six weeks, the herd's RHA jumped 3,000 pounds, to 30,000. Pictured with him are his wife, Marybeth, and their two sons Mitchell, 3 (left), and Matthew, 5. (photo by Krista M. Sheehan)

"With the milk price at that time and the way the economy was going, it was a little extra to spend ..." Seykora said. "It wasn't that big of an investment. With last year's milk prices and an increase in pounds of milk, they were paid for in two months."

Although the extra hours of light means more electricity used, the bump up in the herd's RHA has made the lighting cost efficient.

"It's costing me about a nickel more per cow per day than my first lighting system," Seykora said.

But Seykora said the RHA increase can also be attributed to other management factors. Nutrition for both cows and calves is an important factor for Seykora's herd.



Although the lights helped boost milk production, Seykora said quality forages and a good breeding program are the backbone of putting milk in the tank. Seykora Boone Cecil, pictured above, is the highest producing cow in his barn, peaking at 147 pounds of milk per day.

"Quality forages have always been the backbone," Seykora said. "Very seldom do I feed haylage below 200 relative feed quality." Seykora feeds a total mixed ration and top dresses with hay.

About five years ago, Seykora started his heifer calves on an accelerated growth program using a milk replacer with 26 percent protein and 18 percent fat.

"All those cattle are in their first and second lactations now," Seykora said.

Most of the first-calf heifers in Seykora's herd are averaging about 29,000 pounds of milk in their first lactation. The cows that are second lactation and older average about 33,000 pounds of

milk.

A good breeding program goes hand in hand with nutrition, Seykora said. His breeding program is geared towards production, which was a little different than the 34 cows he purchased to create his herd 11 years ago. When the cows arrived at the farm, they had a RHA of 16,500.

"They were big show-type animals so I knew if I changed their ration they had the ability to milk," Seykora said. "We've come a long way since then."

Seykora uses top-of-the-line bulls in the top 95th percentile.

"I use A.I. to its fullest benefit," he said. "I feel if you spend a few extra dollars you're going to see a big return in three years when the cattle are back in the barn."

He focuses on high production, net merit dollars and bulls with above average traits for udders, and feet and legs.

"I'm not into showing or contracting so I have to make my money through the tank," Seykora said.

For now, Seykora said there won't be much change on the farm, especially with lower milk prices. But with his new lighting system and the continuation of his nutrition

and breeding programs, he hopes to keep the milk in the tank.

"I'll try to use the best genetics and keep putting up good forages, then things will just happen by themselves from a production standpoint," Seykora said. "But you can't wake up and say I want to be at 30,000 (RHA) at the end of the year. It takes time." •