

Teaming up

Key Points

- With son Jonathan coming into the farm, the Masons called in the Dairy Profit team.
- Salty Acres is one of 15 farms in a pilot project that's set to expand.
- Profit team's advice helps Masons make profitable business decisions.

By **REBECCA SCHUELKE STAHR**

SALTY Acres Farm wasn't interested in expanding the milking herd to generate more cash. It took several kitchen table meetings before the Dairy Profit team gathered at the Silver Springs, N.Y., dairy understood that.

Alan and Trish Mason and son Jonathan wanted to explore how to make their existing Wyoming County farm better. Where could money be saved? What are the opportunities to reduce labor? And so on.

Once that realization sank in, the team started identifying goals and strategies: Cull some cows with high somatic cell counts, experiment with sexed semen to increase heifer births, hire custom forage harvesting, avoid replacing aging equipment and more.

How teams work

A Dairy Profit team is a set of consultants — lenders, veterinarians, agronomists, nutritionists, Extension educators and others — who serve as advisers. "You get different pictures from different areas," reports Jonathan. "It helped me to consider parts of the business I probably should have been paying more attention to."

Salty Acres is one of 15 farms now halfway through a two-year pilot project. Inspired by successes in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, the New York Farm Viability Institute and New York Center for Dairy Excellence started teams in Wyoming, Madison and Jefferson counties.

Some teams work to increase profitability and milk yield per cow. Others develop plans to transfer farm ownership to the next generation.

Farms in Pennsylvania increased profits by \$249 per cow and improved milk yields by 25% after working with a team, according to the Pennsylvania Center for Dairy Excellence. New York results already have been strong enough that the N.Y. Center for Dairy Excellence expects to launch the program statewide in 2009 with 80 new teams.

How it fit Salty Acres

The Salty Acres team usually meets every other month. "I knew we had areas we could improve on. We aren't the perfect farm," acknowledges Alan, whose grandfather founded the farm in 1937.

Today, Salty Acres milks 70 cows and farms 188 acres. Jonathan came onto the farm full time in October 2007.

A month later, the Masons assem-



PROFIT PILOTS: Alan, Trish and Jonathan Mason have teamed up with Dairy Profit advisers to map their future at Salty Acres.

bled a Dairy Profit team with one goal of bringing that next generation into the business. Other farm goals include improvements to the breeding program, crop quality, labor efficiency and cow comfort.

Starting a team can be uncomfortable, says this family, especially when sharing farm financial information with the whole team. "It raised tempers a little bit," Alan recalls of the early meetings.

"Sometimes, it's hard to be told, 'You ought to be doing this.' Sometimes, we wish people could come here and work

for a week and see what it's really like."

But, he says, the team's advice and focus is beneficial. "The key advantage is getting all your key people and having them sit around the table."

"Just getting everyone together is a benefit," adds Jonathan. "You need input from all areas to make a sound business decision."

Stahr is a communications specialist for New York Farm Viability Institute.

For more on Dairy Profit teams, see Page 5. Check out the Farm Viability Institute at New York Farm Show.

Northeast News & Notes

N.Y. Ag Society honors

American Agriculturist and the New York Farm Viability Institute scored a three-run homer at January's New York State Ag Society meeting. They won three of the four Cap Creal Journalism Award categories for ag media.

The NYFVI series in *American*

Agriculturist covering on-farm innovation projects won best print series in ag media. The series was authored by Kara Dunn of Mannsville, N.Y.

John Vogel's June "Food for Thought" column titled "Ready to face food shortage fears?" was judged as the best editorial by ag media. His August issue photograph titled "An easy load" won the best photo category for all media and Internet.



Sun's still rising on alternative energy

The U.S. biofuel industry developed at breakneck speed. And, with the plunging economy and crude oil prices, risks of that speed have "broken" major ethanol producers.

Although VeraSun's bankruptcy may allow that company to renege on high-priced corn contracts with thousands of farmers from Nebraska to Ohio, Northeast grain industry officials contend that it isn't happening here.

The Agricultural Marketing Resource Center at Iowa State University is studying a hypothetical ethanol plant model that offers some predictive capabilities on whether biofuels are a safe investment. Don Hofstrand, Iowa State ag economist, says, "At the present time, [profitability] is right at about the break-even level. Attracting capital to build more ethanol facilities, especially with the margins we have now, is going to be much more difficult."

Climate change may well be the renewable fuels industry's "wild card," he says. If the new Obama administration "puts a price on carbon" with cap-and-trade legislation or a carbon tax, "It'll change the calculus of economics for the whole energy industry."

It also should give an immediate boost to renewable alternatives like wind, solar and geothermal power. But uncertainty remains about how it would impact ethanol because of the controversy over corn ethanol industry greenhouse gas emissions, he says.

Hofstrand has laid out the ag issues associated with climate change in

Time to nominate your candidate for '10 Mid-Atlantic

WINNERS of the 2009 Mid-Atlantic Master Farmer Award will be announced in the next issue. But now's the time to nominate your candidate(s) for the 2010 honor. They'll need time to work on the application before spring breaks loose.

If you know a farmer who is a community leader, a savvy business person and a true role model for agriculture, be sure that person is nomi-

nated. Nominate individuals, couples or siblings, all of whom qualify. Businesses are not eligible.

Since 1927, the Master Farmer award program has recognized only 633 exemplary farmers from Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. This prestigious lifetime achievement award is co-sponsored by *American Agriculturist* and Cooperative Extension in the above noted states.

Who's eligible

Size of the farming operation isn't a deciding factor. What really matters is that the farming business has demonstrated growth and superb management over the candidate's career.

Candidates must also demonstrate leadership in agricultural and civic organizations, and be from one of the above states.

You may nominate one or more