

# There's more to dairying than milking

By JOSH FLINT

**I**N 1996, Doug and Tom Block went through a bit of a midlife crisis — at least that's what their wives call it. Instead of buying a motorcycle or convertible, the brothers exited the hog business, built a new dairy facility and expanded their cropland.

The Blocks own Hunter Haven Farms, which is just south of Pearl City in Carroll County. Until the mid-'90s, the Blocks were milking 65 cows, cropping 520 acres and running a 50-sow farrow-to-finish swine operation. Today, the brothers, along with their employees, crop 1,870 acres and milk 800 cows. Tom says they made the switch for two main reasons.

"No. 1, we loved the dairy more than the hogs," Tom explains. "No. 2, northern Illinois' topography is not conducive for the large-scale grain production needed for hogs."

Doug manages the dairy, which employs three shifts to milk cows three times a day. Tom oversees crop production, which includes corn, soybeans, alfalfa and wheat.

## The ultimate recycler

Along with the expansion, the Blocks made a serious commitment to conservation. "We look at the dairy as being an ultimate recycler," Tom notes.

In 2004, the brothers built a methane digester. The 800 cows' waste is turned into enough electricity for 120 local

## Key Points

- In 1996, Doug and Tom Block made a commitment to dairying.
- The Blocks view their dairy as the ultimate recycler.
- When they're not farming, Doug and Tom are giving back.

homes, and it meets one-third of the dairy's power needs.

The electricity production is impressive. However, the real payback comes from the solids produced after the methane is removed. The Blocks use the solids for bedding. In addition,

Tom harvests 150 acres of wheat each year, mainly for the straw, which is also used as bedding. As a result,

the Blocks haven't purchased a load of sawdust bedding in quite awhile. Doug says alternative beddings are paying off, especially since the decline in home building has made sawdust even harder to find.

The cows also help boost crop production. Tom meets 80% of his fertility needs with manure; he hires custom applicators to apply manure on acreage up to two miles away from the dairy. The remaining 20% receives commercial fertilizer.

According to Tom, the manure-fertilized fields typically outperform the commercial fertilizer fields. Last year, he saw corn yields up to 175 bushels



**FAMILY OWNED:** Doug (left) and Tom Block include their wives, Edie (left) and Mary, on all farm decisions. The wives are farm co-owners and nurses at FHN Memorial Hospital in Freeport.



**SERIOUS COMMITMENT:** In 1996, Doug (left) and Tom Block made a serious commitment to dairying. The brothers and their employees farm 1,870 acres and milk 800 cows.

## Pond holds fond family memories

**E**VEN if they weren't battling for the Stanley Cup, Doug and Tom Block still remember playing hockey on the farm pond their father built in 1963.

"This was before video games and all of the fun things kids have today," Doug recalls. Sometimes it was just the two brothers playing. Other times, Doug remembers getting a crowd of cousins and friends together for a game. "Our hockey goal was an indentation in the snow," he notes.

So, who was the better player? "I was two years older. Enough said," Doug says.

Once they had children of their own, the Blocks kept the hockey legacy alive. "The last time we went skating was several years ago," says Mary, Tom's wife. "They got out the tractor and scraped the snow off the ice. The whole family went skating."

Several years ago, Doug and his wife, Edie, moved to a new home. When they emptied the freezer, they found several hockey pucks. "I've still got a pile of hockey sticks in the corner of the shop," Doug adds.



**DAD'S GIFT:** Doug and Tom Block's father built the farm pond in 1963. In 1965, he added the cabin. Tom says it only has electricity, but it makes for a nice little retreat.

per acre on the manure fields. The other 20% averaged 150 to 160 bushels.

The Blocks have also found small ways to conserve resources on their farm. After installing the methane digester, they were left with an abundance of used motor oil from the generator engines. Rather than disposing of it, Tom installed a waste-oil heater in the machinery shop. Previously, the shop was heated with a wood-burning furnace.

If that's not enough, Doug uses the heat from the digester motors and the milk cooling compressors to heat the dairy's water. He also markets the digester's carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange.

## Good stewards

Like all Master Farmers, Doug and Tom continually give back to their community. For years, both of them have served on multiple school boards in the area. While on the Lanark School Board, Tom was actively involved in the consolidation of the Lanark and Shannon school districts.

The Blocks are also committed to speaking out on behalf of agriculture. Bruce Johnson, manager of the Stephenson County Farm Bureau, says the Blocks are always willing to use the dairy to teach consumers about milk

production. In fact, Doug has become a bit of a NIMBY fighter. When a high-end subdivision started construction nearby, Doug was one of the first to invite residents to the farm in an effort to alleviate concerns.

More recently, dairyman A.J. Bos has been met with massive criticism over his proposed 10,000-head operation in Jo Daviess County. Part of his proposed plan includes a methane digester. Once again, Doug has invited critics to Hunter Haven Farms to see their digester in action.

Growing up at Hunter Haven, Doug and Tom's children knew they were expected to go to college and learn about agriculture off the farm.

With that, Doug's two sons and Tom's two daughters made their own way. "All of our children are involved in the ag industry," Doug explains. "However, they've been so successful in the industry, that we goofed." Doug doesn't expect any of them to return and take on an operations/live-in manager role. Instead, he expects the four to be involved at the management/ownership level.

"This is one of the reasons we work so hard with our employees," Doug adds. "I'm confident the farm's future is in very capable hands."