

**Siemers Holstein**

Gradual expansion and mastery of the operational procedures at a detailed level are crucial on the Siemers Holstein farm. This means high milk production figures and herdsmen who are focused on preventing disease, rather than curing sick animals.



Dairy cows:	<b>2,800</b>
Young stock:	<b>2,600</b>
Hectares:	<b>1,620</b>
Employees:	<b>40</b>
Milk production:	<b>14,631kg (3.8%bf 3.2%pr)</b>



Dan Siemers



High fibre: hay forms a large part of heifer rations



Top-notch accommodation: there's room for 66 calves in each tent stall



Air flow: mechanical ventilation helps to create a healthy environment for the calves



Life's a beach: new sand-bedded stalls help to maximise cow comfort

## New role for vet boosts opportunities for disease prevention at US-based Siemers Holstein farm

# Taking steps to control disease

The decision to bring heifer rearing back under the control of the Siemers Holstein operation has been accompanied by the introduction of purpose-built stalls. "Successful cattle rearing starts with good ventilation," says Dan Siemers.

text Jaap van der Knaap

**Y**ou can't miss the two new stalls for young stock on the Siemers Holstein farm in Newton, Wisconsin. Next to the farm's driveway are two tent barns, each housing 66 calves up to the age of six weeks. "Last year we brought the rearing of young cattle back under our own umbrella," explains Dan who owns six of these calf barns. He runs the unit with the rest of his family, including Paul, Jenny and Janina Siemers and Sherry Siemers-Peterman.

"Rearing heifers costs money, but now we feel we have more control over the development and growth of the animals." A deliberate choice was made to house the youngest calves in specially designed stalls instead of calf hutches. "It would take two hectares of land if we were to keep all the calves in hutches. We really like that we have maximum control over the climate in these stalls. We believe successful cattle rearing starts with good ventilation."

Immediately after birth, the calves are given 4.5 litres of colostrum, after which the heifer calves are transferred to the calf stall, where they are each given a pen measuring 1.2m x 2.75m. The stall is equipped with a mechanical ventilation system that allows the air flow to be adjusted individually for each calf. An inflatable translucent curtain is mounted on the side wall.

### Labour efficiency

In summer the calves lie on sawdust, while in cold winters they lie on straw. "This system is very efficient in terms of labour," explains Dan. "Once the calves are old enough we transfer them to a different location. It takes two men just one day to muck out the stall, remove the partitions and clean and disinfect the stall and prepare the barn for the next batch."

The calves are given pasteurised milk for six weeks. The milk is tested regularly to

analyse its composition and if necessary a mineral supplement is added. According to the Siemers, biosecurity is another key element in rearing young cattle. "Visitors are not allowed in the rearing stalls and when stalls are cleaned they are routinely disinfected. The investment in the barn, at 2,000 dollars (£1,300) per calf, was a major one, but we don't want to leave anything to chance. A good start to growth is crucial for later development."

The Siemers' decision to raise young cattle themselves was accompanied by the decision to build a new barn for the most promising young cattle. Some 2,600 young cattle are kept on the unit, which is fully committed to investing in genetics. Last year 1,000 embryos were implanted, a large proportion of which were from their own breeding cows. "When you invest in breeding, you must

make sure that the young animals get the best possible chance," explains Dan, as he shows off the new stall with lots of space and a ration with much fibre and protein for the 400 animals.

### Disappointing yields

Three years ago a batch of heifers were crossed with Montbeliarde and Swedish Red Holsteins. Now the first 250 daughters are being milked. "We wanted to improve our fertility and reduce calf mortality figures," says Dan. "We managed to achieve this as a result of crossbreeding, but milk production is so disappointing that we are not pursuing it any further. In our situation, the improvement in fertility does not adequately compensate for the drop in production that we've seen compared to pure-bred Holsteins."

The herd's calving interval is 13.5

months and the pregnancy rate to first service is 25%. Every 28 days, the vet scans the animals for pregnancy. He is also enlisted to help with surgery. "We have a good herdsmen who has performed our surgery himself for many years, but recently have started using an independent vet again. Our herdsmen was too busy to cure sick animals. In our view it's more economical for him to focus on how he can prevent disease in the herd," says Dan.

The production figures prove that good rations are provided at the feed fence and that the cows are well looked after. The 2,600 cows produce an average of 14,631kg of milk with 3.8% fat and 3.2% protein. This good standard of care requires considerable effort.

"We've just replaced all the free-stall mattresses with sand bedding and increased their dimensions," says Dan,

recalling the huge construction project. "We tackled one pen of the stall at a time. Removing the boxes and mattresses, breaking up the concrete and laying new floors took one week per pen with nine workers and in total we replaced 16 pens."

The excellent performance indicators mentioned above reflect the Siemers family's dedication to herd progression and expansion. However, this past year, there have been no expansion projects. "This year, for the first time since we started at this location in 1995, we haven't expanded at all," says Dan. "The strength of our farm lies in the fact that we have always expanded in small steps to control debt. The advantage of the choices we've made is that even with a farm of this size, we are always closely involved in all the operational procedures." |

First impressions: the unit's two new calf houses look as good on the outside as they do on the inside

