

Lingen Dairy

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said. “Everybody has their role. My folks come out every day and work. Mom is so busy with everything, from washing the robots to keeping book and cooking us meals.”

Lingen said his brother-in-law currently works with the calves and assists his dad in the repair shop. Lingen’s wife, Andrea, works fulltime at a school, but as a veterinarian, also helps when those services are needed.

“I do all the feeding of the cattle, ordering of supplies and organizing stuff,” he said. “My sister (Heather) and Reed moved back from Tennessee and Reed works here fulltime. My wife does all the stuff here that we need. It’s great. She actually has a veterinarian degree, but she’d have to go back to school to get it U.S. certified.”

On the Lingen Dairy Farm, newborn calves are separated from their mothers and started on their own program the first day.

“So much research has shown that it’s so much better for the calf, to take them right away,” Lingen said. “These stock cow guys right now are just struggling. There’s been a lot of issues with clostridium, which is bacteria that gets in the navel because the conditions are so wet. It kills the calf in two days.”

The newborns stay in individual huts indoors for two weeks and are then moved to a bigger pen where they have more room to run around. During that time, the calves drink from a nipple that has milk automatically dispensed to them according to their individual needs. After a few months, the similar-aged calves move to a different pen to make room for younger ones.

“Cows get a break before and after the calf (gestation is 9 months), so they basically have one calf a year,” Lingen said. “We’ve actually been breeding a lot of our cows to a black angus, so we’ve got black angus calves we’re selling to the beef market because there’s such a premium for them. When the dairy calves are worth \$5 and the angus calves are worth \$250, you’re sacrificing a heifer calf, but basically, it’s a source of income.”

Between the 400 milking-age cows and new heifers, Lingen said about 500 calves a year are born on the farm.

“We’re growing and selling,” he said. “It’s just a



A week-old dairy calf was born with a heart on its forehead.

cycle.” While automation has helped improve cow and calf health, decrease physical labor and increase yields, there are still significant costs, such as feed, hay and breeding.

“If you don’t get the cow bred, then you can’t get the milk,” Lingen said. “And you invest \$2,000 to grow the calf into a milk cow. It can just about break you. We have all our input costs. We do some custom silage and custom manure hauling. We also do our own hay. We’re always trying to do more.”

The Lingens invested a lot financially toward the cutting-edge dairy operation with the hopes of high returns. When it came to construction, they said they stayed locally and tried to go with the best.

“We went with people who knew what they were doing — people with lots of experience,” Lingen said.

SK&D Construction did the concrete work, while Tinklenburg Lumber, Reber Construction and Gorter’s Clay and Dairy were instrumental in other ways, as were Tyler Electric and Spartz Plumbing & Heating. Bed, stalls and accessory equipment was purchased from Lang Ag.

“The cows are laying on baby diaper gel with compressed air mattresses,” Lingen said. “It’s new technology and costs more than \$500 a bed. The nice thing about the compressed air is that it’s like a tire. There’s always pressure back. So, the cow lays down, but the pressure pushes back, whereas most old mattresses, cows would lay on it and it would get flat over time. Now, these are perfect.”

The cows stand on rubber mats and eat totally mixed ration (TMR). A Lely robot called Juno pushes the feed up to the cows.

“That’s his only job, 24 hours a day, all on his own,” Lingen said. “He pushes the food up every hour. Then when he’s done, he’ll go and charge himself into the charger, so he’s always got a full battery.”

An automatic manure scraper also operates



Dairy cows at Lingen Dairy eat totally mixed ration, available at all times of the day as ease and cow comfort help increase overall milk yields.



Lingen Dairy Farm heifers seem to enjoy the sunny day recently as they chomp on their food.

automatically 24 hours a day. “To build these barns, it’s about \$14,000 a cow,” Lingen said. “That’s for everything,

including the robots, concrete, everything. The robots are 25-year investments. The cows move around freely. They



Josh Lingen pours powdered milk replacer into a machine that automatically mixes it with high-quality water and delivers it one at a time to calves, depending on their individual needs.

can eat, drink, lay, scratch on a brush or do whatever they want when they want. They just don’t do outside, until the summertime. I’ve got a place where I can put a cow on a lot if she’s got a sore foot or something. Then they can have access to sunlight, which is especially healthy for cows after wintertime.”

The overall system in place is geared to increase milk production and provide optimal comfort for the cows. Research has shown that increased resting time is key for better cow productivity.

Lingen said the life span of a milk cow is roughly six years.

“It’s two years to grow them into a milk cow,” he said. “After two years, every lactation is approximately a year. You get about four calves and then the cows usually

start to break down. So, it’s about four years of milking. Then it’s on to McDonald’s. There are other companies, too, but that’s actually one of them that buys the meat from us.”

While the cows are there to serve a purpose, Lingen said reputable dairy farmers don’t mistreat their animals. And you even get attached to some of them.

“I’ve got one cow, that when she goes, I’m going to bawl like a baby,” he said. “She’s the sweetest, nicest cow. She might be big, but she comes up and puts her head on your shoulder. It can be hard to let them go, but our thing is to just give them the best life we can while they’re here.”



The teats and udder on a jersey dairy cow get washed by a robotic arm with a soft brush before being automatically milked by a Lely Astronaut system the Lingen Dairy Farm invested in.

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