

Hidden Money Found On Wisconsin Dairies

“More money in my pocket!” is probably one of the most common responses a Wisconsin dairy producer would give if asked to list their farm’s most pressing goal. Bart and Sarah Sopa of Portage County believe they have found an answer to achieving some of that goal and they think more producers should follow their example.

What is the answer they have found? The Sopa’s are participating in the *Milk Money Program*, a team based milk quality improvement program developed by Dr. Pam Ruegg of the University of Wisconsin’s Dairy Science department. Milk Money is designed to help producers improve milk quality through the formation of an on-farm milk quality team focusing specifically on issues related to their individual dairy farm.

Bart and Sarah Sopa began Milk Money in July of 2006 and have experienced excellent results. The Sopa’s assumed responsibility for Bart’s father’s farm in April of 2006. Milking 45 Holsteins averaging 55 lbs/cow/day, they began with a cell count of 520,000 and a plate count of 37,000. They knew they needed to make some changes to become profitable, but they weren’t sure where to start. When they contacted UW Extension for advice, Ken Schroeder, Ag Extension agent in Portage County, suggested putting together a Milk Money team to help them evaluate their whole operation. Assembling a team was a new idea, but “the Sopa’s were very open to the process” and as a result “were able to make great progress” in improving their milk quality.

Milk Money was developed as a team based, milk quality improvement program to assist producers in defining milk quality goals, creating a milk quality plan and adopting best management practices. The program focuses on establishing a team of farm advisors that meet monthly to review progress toward those goals. The viewpoints of each team member provides an opportunity to focus on milk quality from many perspectives.

The Sopa’s Milk Money team included their veterinarian, milk plant field representative, nutritionist and milking equipment dealer in addition to Schroeder (who acted as team facilitator). The farm business and production manager from Mid-State Technical College joined

them at their last two meetings. Milk Money encourages teams to meet four months in a row. The first meeting is used to accumulate data, set goals, decide on actions and assign responsibilities. At the second through fourth meetings, the team reviews and revises goals and actions and continues forward planning.

At their first meeting in July, 2006, the Sopa's set goals that included reducing their somatic cell count to 350,000 and increasing their daily production to 65 pounds/cow/day. They also set a longer range goal of slowly increasing their herd size from 45 to 68 head. Initial actions included changes in milking procedures, repairs to milking equipment, increasing mastitis management efforts, and enrolling in DHIA testing.

Success was evident by the team's third meeting. The herd somatic cell count goal had already been achieved so they set a new goal of 200,000 cells/ml. Less than six months from beginning the Milk Money process, the herd's somatic cell count had dropped from 520,000 cells/ml to 231,000 cells/ml, their standard plate count had dropped from 37,000 to 6,000 cfu/ml and their milk production had increased from 55 to 66.9 lbs/cow/day. These were all measurable successes that resulted in increased money in their pocket. Rather than stop after four meetings, the Sopa's elected to re-assemble their team periodically to continue to monitor progress and reassess their goals.

When asked to assess the Milk Money process, Bart replied, "We didn't talk about anything I didn't already know. It was just that we hadn't looked at some of the suggestions in the same way." "It was nice to have everyone assembled in the same place and figure out together how to approach a problem area. When you have them all together it's harder to push responsibility on to someone else. In the team format we had to come to some sort of agreement." Bart noted however that "the team doesn't do the work for you. They helped decide the most effective way to do things with the best use of our money and they gave support and advice." But, in the end" Sopa recognized, "it was our decision on what to do. The great part was that we had choices that everyone had agreed on, and that was what helped move us forward. "

The Sopa's are just one of over 400 Milk Money teams in Wisconsin that have increased profitability by improving milk quality. Analysis of 113 herds enrolled in Milk Money between 2001 and 2004 revealed an average \$1,033 per month increase per farm in quality incentive

income alone. Income improvement can also come from increased milk production, and reduced costs associated with mastitis. The Milk Money Team process tailors itself to the needs of individual dairies when addressing those areas.

Bart and Sarah Sopa encourage any producer who is ready to improve milk quality on their dairy to set up a team as soon as possible. It is as simple as calling 1-866-867-6455 or contacting their local extension agent. Information can also be found at www.uwex.edu/milkquality. Milk Money has proven that more money can be found when you have a whole team behind you.

Eileen Nelson, Outreach Coordinator
UW Milk Money
866-867-6455