

Kansas dairy places priority on training, learning from employees

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After 25 years in business, Ag Oasis of Liberal, Kansas, has learned a lot about how to do things right. Part of that has been teaching – and learning from – summer interns as well as their full-time employees.

Farm history and protocols

Ag Oasis began in 1993 when the Tuls family moved from southern California to Kansas to start Tuls Dairy with 1,800 cows. In 2003 they started looking for new opportunities and purchased Lost Trail 1 and Lost Trail 2 in Oklahoma. They remodeled both sites and expanded the herd to a total of 5,600 milking cows at three locations.

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In 2002 the Tuls family entered a partnership with the Hemann family. Todd and Pete Tuls were partners in California. In 2000 Todd left to build a dairy in Nebraska. About that time Todd and Pete contacted Brian Hemann with a business opportunity at Tuls Dairy. Hemann then moved his family dairy from New Mexico to the Tuls facility that year.

In 2006 to 2007 a new facility, MasCow Dairy, was built in Moscow, Kansas, and the two families were milking 8,300 cows at the four locations. The operations are about 110 miles apart.

From 2007 to 2009 enhancements to all four facilities, including an expansion of Lost Trail and additional corrals at Tuls Dairy, allowed them to grow the herd to 9,750 cows.

MasCow and Lost Trail 1 and 2 are open lot facilities, and at Tuls Dairy, half of the cows are in freestalls. Cows on the open lots have windbreaks, shade and composted packs. The cows are grouped by reproductive status.

Ag Oasis has a combined yearly average pregnancy rate of 28 percent on all dairies, and just 4 percent of conceptions are timed A.I. events.

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They do use sorted semen on heifers to progress genetics faster and breed older cows to beef bulls. They do not currently use genomics, but may consider it in the future, Clint Anderson, operations manager of the four dairy locations, says.

Cows at all four of the Ag Oasis locations average 80 pounds of energy-corrected milk, with 3.9 percent fat and 3.2 percent protein.



Internship program

Anderson says their intern program, which they started in 2015, has helped them become a better operation.

“We thought we were training [employees] pretty well; we weren’t,” he says. “It hasn’t always been the easiest, but it’s allowed us to understand a whole lot more about who we are, what we can get better at, how we are conveying information and ultimately, hopefully charging up some people who are going to be excited about the dairy business.”

Anderson says the interns gave them feedback of what training was actually done and what they understood from the training. “I think that often new employees don’t want to be seen as troublesome or not smart, so they don’t ask questions or say anything about how they were trained or the lack of training,” he says.

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Anderson says there are not a lot of people who understand the dairy industry in their area. “We want other new people to be excited about dairy like we are, so we started our summer internship program.”

Since they started the program, they have had nine interns total, five of whom worked there in summer 2018.

Intern Emily Bennigsdorf says each intern had to learn about every part of the farm to completely understand how it operates as a whole.

She says she learned to treat each cow as an individual, from herd health to the breeding program and maternity.



Employee benefits and expectations

Anderson says with all of their employees, training and protocols are a top priority.

Each site has its own dairy manager, and then a facility supervisor and a herd supervisor. Each milking shift has a shift supervisor. Anderson says their employees are vital to success.

“Proper training and protocols makes them comfortable with their jobs, lets them know they are doing their jobs correctly and give us consistency,” he says.

In addition to competitive wages, Ag Oasis offers insurance to their employees after 60 days, and to the employees’ families after three years, among other benefits. Anderson says if workers in the dairy industry only see the paycheck as important, “we are defeating ourselves long term. We want to recruit better and better people, and make this a long-term job for them, not just a short-term get-by kind of job.”

They offer paid vacation for all employees, recognizing that the dairy industry is demanding, and they want their employees to have a good quality of life. They offer bonuses for length of service and reward employees for taking on increased responsibility.

Their philosophy is simple: “The employees take care of the cows, so we need to take care of them.”

To try to better utilize and distribute all the data they have available, they offer user-friendly charts, which include a head milker's report, a manager's report and a feeder report. This is given to all employees to help them better understand what needs improving.

"Most everybody wants to succeed; very few people don't really care," Anderson says. "But sometimes there is a lack from upper management to share information down at the bottom level. We want to build a culture that leads to a progressive dairy consistently performing a little better every day."

Vendor and neighborhood awareness

Just like with the employees, Anderson says they recognize there are benefits to long-term relationships with their vendors. They realize sometimes it is better to sit down with a vendor and have a hard talk and figure things out, rather than continually starting over, building relationships with new vendors.


Although they do grow some crops themselves, they purchase the majority of their operations' feed from other farmers – mostly from three nearby operations – while they concentrate on the dairies.

Anderson says whenever possible they like to keep it simple and do things right. Maternity pens on all farms are walked at least hourly. Calves leave the farm at a day old and go to a "trusted value partner."

"You don't trust your heifers and your future over to somebody that you don't have a great relationship with," Anderson says. "They are a family farm, just like we are."

Aquifers in the area are known to be depleting, so they work hard to be very responsible with their water use on the farm.

"An example of this is our parlor cooling," Anderson says. "We are in the process of changing from a sprinkler system to a high-pressure misting system with our fans. What we were seeing was that while the sprinklers did cool the cows in the holding pen, it also was wasting water that was not hitting the cows as the holding pen was moved up into the parlor by the crowd gate."

Ag Oasis desired a more stable way to sell their milk, so in 2012 they partnered with Kansas Dairy Ingredients. KDI is a reverse osmosis plant, which removes the water content from the milk before moving it. That way the transportation costs are decreased and the remaining water is left in western Kansas, some of which is used for farm irrigation. 

Kelli Boylen is a freelance writer based in northeast Iowa.

Learn more about the [internship program at Ag Oasis here](#).

PHOTO 1: An employee pushes feed up at the bunk.

PHOTO 2: Intern Emily Bennigsdorf says she learned to treat each cow as an individual, particularly with the breeding program.

PHOTO 3: Ag Oasis in Liberal, Kansas, includes four dairy operations and is owned by (left to right) Parker Tuls, Pete Tuls Jr., Pete Tuls Sr., Brian Hemann, Jeff Hemann and Brad Hemann.

“We want to make sure every cow is given the chance to succeed on her own, rather than be forced through a program,” Operations Manager Clint Anderson says. “We have the luxury with our open lots that the cows have a lot of freedom to express heat. We need to make sure we have the systems and protocols in place to pick up on that.” *Photos courtesy of Ag Oasis.*