



Kevin Cavanaugh: A Champion of Quality Milk

Achieving MMPA's top quality award just one time is a remarkable achievement considering it signifies that a producer was able to maintain excellent quality levels for 12 consecutive months. Any producer who has earned the MMPA's prestigious Top Quality Award is among an elite group, but MMPA producer Kevin Cavanaugh, owner of Ireland Bells Dairy in Leslie, is in a class of his own. For the fourth straight year, Kevin has produced the top quality milk in the cooperative.

"Kevin and his employees milk 65 cows," MMPA District 4 Director Dan Javor said during MMPA's Annual Meeting. "Achieving quality premium levels on all three tests: somatic cell, PI and raw bacteria for 12 months just to be considered for this award is commendable. To maintain those levels for more than 48 months is truly remarkable."

Kevin's herd achieved the following quality averages this past year: Somatic Cell Count of 48,833, PI count of 2,750 and Raw Bacteria Count of 1,333.

The humble dairy farmer is quick to say that while he appreciates receiving the award, he believes that every MMPA member has the ability and tools available to achieve high quality milk.

"I'd like to see the whole state be under 100,000 SCC," Kevin says. "It's doable. Imagine how great MMPA's milk would be then."

Kevin's idyllic 100,000 SCC dream may not be a fairytale for MMPA. Each year, the cooperative's overall SCC has been going down, earning MMPA the honors of having some of the highest quality milk in the nation. In 2010, MMPA's average SCC was 199,000.

That average has been steadily dropping since the mid-90s.

"High counts are usually caused by poor milking habits and something wrong with the milking equipment or cows' environment," Kevin says.

Finding out what is lacking in those key areas can help dairy farmers begin their journey to high quality milk. All of those topics are covered at MMPA Milker Training Schools, held each spring, which Kevin and/or his employees have attended for several years.

"It seems like people would want to go to the Milker Training Schools," Kevin says. "They help you learn how to milk your cows better and talk about how to deal with mastitis."

Even with such high quality milk, Kevin still deals with some cases of mastitis on his farm. He has picked up some pointers for dealing with it from the Milker Training Schools, such as using the Porta SCC to monitor fresh cows.

"We are never going to completely get rid of mastitis—it's always going to be with us," Kevin says. "You always have to watch and keep a constant vigil."

At Ireland Bells, Kevin considers 50,000 SCC as "normal" for his cows. Kevin and his employees monitor the cows with the Porta SCC milk test as well as monthly DHI testing. All fresh cows are tested with the Porta SCC before they are allowed to enter the milking string.

If a cow has a high count of 100,000-150,000, Kevin will allow her to try to work out the infection on

her own and lets her stay in the milking string. She is monitored carefully and if her SCC reaches 200,000, she is removed from the milking string and treated.

“If we have cows with a history of problems, we just get rid of them,” Kevin says. “It works out well, especially with the beef price being higher.”

Kevin has noticed that with the few high count cows he encounters, a good majority of them don't have clinical signs of mastitis.

“It's always a fight,” Kevin says. “We can get a cow that spikes up and all of a sudden we have 100,000 SCC in the tank.”

A 12-month average of 48,833 SCC is proof that Kevin and his employees are diligent in managing infections and paying close attention to proper milking procedures as taught at the Milker Training Schools.

“Kevin has set extremely high goals for his farm and he and his employees have done an incredible job meeting those goals through careful herd management and utilization of training resources such as MMPA's Milker Training Schools,” says Dean Letter, MMPA Manager of Producer Testing and Herd Health Programs. “We appreciate Kevin's kind words regarding MMPA's schools but the success he has realized on his farm is clearly attributable to applying the Milker Training School techniques consistently to every cow at each milking. MMPA applauds Kevin and Ireland Bells Dairy for a long record of producing consistently high quality milk.”

One remarkable element of this year's top quality achievement is that two of Kevin's primary milkers

greatly reduced their hours to spend time with their families. That left Kevin, who works a full-time job as a prison guard for the State of Michigan, in need of well-trained milkers.

“In the past year and a half, we transitioned from two employees to two different employees milking the cows,” Kevin says. “I sent the new milkers to Milker Training School and let them know how important it was to do it right.”

More changes are in store for Ireland Bells Dairy in the near future. The farm is at the end of a three-year process partially funded by the NRCS to transition cropping ground to grazing pastures. Kevin was able to get some financial assistance from the NRCS to install fencing and water lines to transform his main farm into a hay and grazing operation.

“I am looking forward to grazing,” Kevin says. “It should be healthier for the cows. I am also hoping it's easy to keep the SCC down.”



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It seems that the most successful farms actively manage parlor activities. People milking cows need to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. What is the farm's milking procedure? Is the procedure conducive to maintaining low somatic cell count and udder health? What indication does the farm management give to the people milking cows that what is done in the parlor is important to management and has an impact to the farm's success? The answers

need to be clear, concise, and consistent. To get the greatest benefit out of MMPA's Milker Training Schools, farm managers need to reinforce the concepts back home on the farms. This is good for the cows, for the people milking the cows, and for milk quality.

MMPA Member Kevin Cavanaugh has produced the highest quality milk in the cooperative for four consecutive years. Ask him how he continues to achieve this success and he will

quickly give some of the credit to the quality training he and his employees received at MMPA's Milker Training School.

“I don't know why anyone wouldn't go to a Milker Training School,” Kevin says. “We go each year and learn something new every time.”

Through MMPA's Milker Training Schools, students learn the importance of thorough sanitation of the entire teat, especially the teat

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