



Pilot Herd Case Study

Owned and operated by brothers Steve, Paul, and Joe Fetzer, along with help from their mother, Betsy, Fetzer Farms, Inc., has come a long way since Perry Fetzer bought the 40-acre farm near Elmwood, Wis., in 1914.

Steve, Paul Joe came back to the farm to join Joe, and their late father Bob, in 1993. Since then, several expansions have taken place. The most recent upgrade, completed in October 2008, included a 772-cow cross ventilated free-stall barn, 11 million gallon manure pit with sand separator, and a new double-20 parallel parlor.

Fetzer Farms has grown to about 1,700 tillable acres and 1,160 cows milked three times a day. Rolling herd average is around 25,800 pounds of milk. Steve's role on the farm is employee and herd manager; Paul is the general manager of Fetzer Farms, Inc.; Joe heads up crop and waste management, and Betsy is the bookkeeper and secretary at the farm.



Fetzer Farms employs two calf and heifer raising operations for their herd. When calves are born, they are sent to an operation south of Plum City, Wis., eight miles from the farm and kept until they are six months old. The Fetzers' calves are the only group of calves at the facility. They are then shipped to a heifer raiser about 25 miles away, where they commingle with other groups of calves. Finally, the bred heifers are brought back to the home farm two to six weeks before they freshen. Typically, heifers usually move once or twice a month. The average number of animals Fetzer Farms buys is 60 to 100 within a year, but Paul believes that soon they will be able to raise enough replacements.

Premises Registration

Paul registered the Fetzer Farms Premises prior to the Premises Registration Act that took effect in 2006. He had read about premises registration in a farming magazine and registered over the phone. In 2008 he noticed a news listing online for the pilot herd program and called WLIC to get involved. "We were looking at expanding and thought RFID might help," explained Paul.

Identification System

While still milking in the older parlor in April 2008 before the new expansion was complete, Fetzer Farms implemented Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology by converting the old parlor using a portal reading device that would scan the RFID tagged cows as they entered the

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*– Paul Fetzer
Fetzer Farms, Inc.
Herd Manager*

Top 3 advantages of current system

1. Time and labor savings

2. Affordability

3. Data entry

parlor. The Fetzers have since upgraded their RFID system using the DeLaval parlor system to read each individual cow as they are milking. Fetzers have moved the portal reader to the new parlor and incorporated it with an automatic sort gate to scan tags and help sort cattle.

As part of the pilot program, the Fetzers use a wand and hand held device with head phones. It didn't take very long for the brothers to set up the system and synch it up with DairyComp 305. "Our representative was just out to the farm about two to three weeks ago to put new programming on the handheld," said Paul. They previously had used neck transponders to record data, but when they decided to use RFID, these were taken off. "The longest part of the process was simply taking off the collars, which took almost a week," said Paul.

The Fetzer cattle were tagged with 840 tags over the course of only a few days in April 2008. Dry cows were tagged as they calved, and calves are tagged before they leave the farm. So far, Paul says the tag retention has been great with no major problems.

The Fetzers employ their RFID system during herd health checks and with their DHIA representative. "Ken comes once a month and brings his own reader and hand held," says Paul. "One guy is typically downstairs taking samples, while another is upstairs reading each group." In addition to record keeping, the Fetzers have found the RFID technology very helpful when sorting cattle for hoof trimming and at dry off time using their sort gate.

Values Gained

• **Efficiency** – Paul and his brothers have noticed the time and labor savings since implementing the RFID technology. "If the sort gate is working properly, it saves a ton of labor when compared to hand sorting animals," said Paul. They also noticed ease of data recording and identification during herd health checks. "It is so slick and easy to walk down the headlocks and read the tags to find the numbers we need," said Paul.

• **Price** – When compared to the neck responders, Paul finds the RFID system to be a less expensive means to record data. "You're looking at a \$2 to \$3 tag versus what was then an \$80 collar," explained Paul.

• **Data Entry** – Downloading the data they retain from the readers is much faster than keying in their records from paper during herd health days. "It only takes a few minutes to download and transfer information," said Paul. "It used to take so long to key in each entry."



Future Outlook

Paul and his brothers believe that mandatory national identification is not far in the future. "Each one of us has a social security number," explains Paul. "What's the difference between that and our animals having an RFID tag?"

Protecting their animals against disease outbreaks is a focus at Fetzer Farms, and they believe that greater animal traceability is a proactive way to achieve control. "It's important for consumers and the government to have a way to trace animals back to their original farms," says Paul. "Accountability is very important in the animal agriculture industry." The Fetzers believe everyone should participate in a universal animal identification and tracing program to not only control disease outbreak but to reap the rewards of an efficient system.

