



DAIRY CATTLE REPRODUCTION COUNCIL

## When Reproductive Programs Are Done Right

Whether it involves management practices, genetics or environmental conditions, getting cows bred can be a challenge. In this article we've highlighted a successful dairy producer who has been able to manage a strong reproduction program in the midst of all the other operations on the dairy. Mike Larson from Larson Acres, Evansville, Wisconsin shares experiences on what has worked best to get cows bred on their dairy, and provides advice on how other dairyman can learn from their experiences.

### Getting cows bred in America's Dairyland

When it comes to getting cows pregnant, Larson Acres has many different tactics to make sure cows are bred at the right time. The dairy is home to 2,600 Holsteins. Cows are milked three times each day and spend their days resting in a sand-bedded freestall barn. The family also crops over 3,500 acres.

When it comes to reproduction on their farm, Mike Larson says they have taken advantage of scientific research and new technology to keep pregnancy rates high. They use different methods for breeding different groups of cows:



- For first-service breedings, all cows are bred on a presynch program. Cows are given two shots of prostaglandin followed by an Ovsynch™ program. Cows are resynched at 25 days with GnRH and ultrasounded at 32 days after insemination. If they are open, they receive a shot of prostaglandin and are then bred three days later.
- Larson Acres ignores all signs of heat before cows are serviced for the first time. After cows are serviced, they will breed open cows that show natural heats. They also breed a small percentage of their herd by using pedometers, the data from which are linked to software utilized by the milking parlor equipment to identify cows potentially in heat.
- For the past 18 months, the dairy has been using controlled internal drug release (CIDR®) devices to get two types of tough breeders pregnant. The first group is older cows with a body condition score of 2.5 or less. CIDRs are given to these cows after the first prostaglandin shot and removed before the second. The farm has seen a pregnancy rate improvement of four to five points and the reproductive rates are now similar to those of the other cows in the same pen.
- The second group is open cystic cows. If these cows are open at 32 days after breeding, a CIDR is used and cows are given another shot of GnRH. Although this is a relatively new protocol on the farm, early indications are that it's working.



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The farm has seen results using the multiple reproductive protocols. They are currently running a 20 percent pregnancy rate, but have seen rates as high as 25 percent. The herd is running conception rates between 36 to 38 percent during the first service. But even with their reproductive success, Larson says there are still places where their program can be improved.

“I would really like to improve our first service conception rates by five points,” he says. “I am working on the details of a future trial with Milo Wiltbank of the University of Wisconsin on using a double Ovsynch program to replace our presynch program.”



### **Trust the technology...**

Mike Larson attributes their reproductive success to two management changes. First, they pushed the voluntary waiting period (VWP) back to 74 days. By doing this, they have given cows more time to begin cycling and become ready for conception. They have stopped cherry picking cows in heat. Rather than breeding cows that show signs of heat after the second prostaglandin shot, they ignore any signs of heat and breed the animals as the shot protocol instructs them to.

“We’ve learned most of our techniques by working and talking with other producers, university faculty members and agribusiness individuals in the industry,” said Larson. “Nothing we do is new or magical. We’ve learned it from other people who have seen the results.”

### **...and the employees**

Another key to the Larson Acres reproductive program is the role of employees. All of the breeding is done in-house, so trained employees are doing a great job getting cows pregnant. The farm uses two to three breeders to complete all of the breedings. The employees that are involved in the reproduction program have been involved with the farm for an extended period of time. Even with their breeding skills, Mike notes that they do offer on-farm refresher courses to keep their breeders up to speed and at the top of their performance.

Getting cows pregnant is the bottom line. Even though reproductive protocols are different for every farm, it’s important to find one method and stick to it, like Larson Acres. Whether you decide to breed on natural heats, use heat detectors like pedometers or use an Ovsynch program, following set protocols can ensure reproductive success.