

First Impressions

Thursday, August 28, 2008

9:25 PM

What I knew:

Herd Size: Approx 400 cows

User of byproduct feeds

When I was first offered the opportunity to work with Ben Smith in New Zealand, I was expecting a swing line herringbone parlor typical of smaller Missouri grazing herds. I had been told he was a smart grazer but I had no idea to what extent he incorporated technology into his day to day practices on the farm. He was eager to help me with any problem that arose while I was trying to get a visa and has been helpful in every other regard.

What Has Changed

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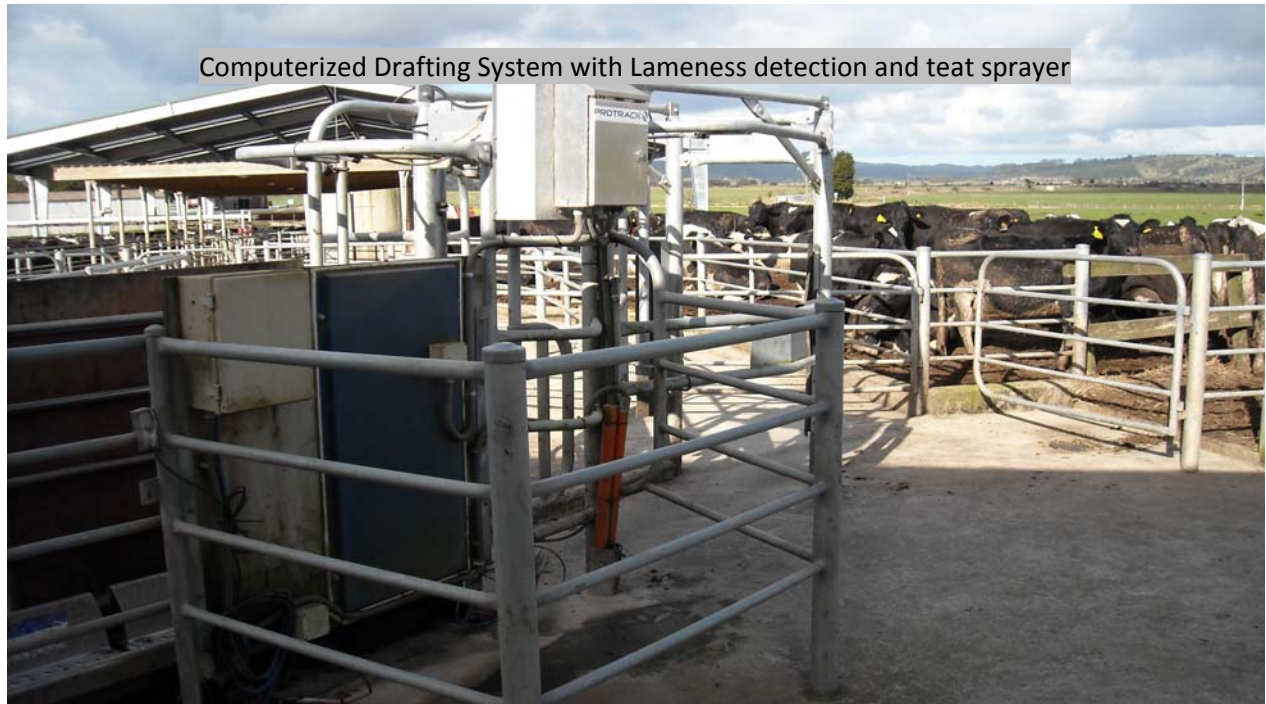
When I arrived in New Zealand, I had no cell phone reception and was lost in a large airport. Ben soon found me and we made our way to his car. As if New Zealand wasn't already keen enough on saving fuel he bought this fuel sipper to drive around in, and this observation followed along with how he runs his farm. As I was about to find, Ben is not paranoid about up front costs like American farmers seem to be. We are always trying to get by with what we have or something that isn't ideal for its use because the cost of buying a new item is quite high. Ben seems to look at a number of different factors: Time savings, labor savings, ease of use, cow comfort, money saved over the long run, along with a couple of others. Taking a seat in the very back is the up front cost. If he can see the benefit to the farm and the cows, there is not much he won't try.

Computers Are Your Friend

A lot of American dairy producers are really lagging behind New Zealand in terms of the use of computers to track various statistics recorded on the cows. I'm not talking about a program that you have to physically enter the data and it just files your data. That doesn't even qualify in my book. I'm talking about a program that tracks milk production, somatic cell count, whether they are fresh, etc. and draft them accordingly.



Computers are very versatile in terms of uses. Soon there will be a tracking system on the feed wagon to tell the driver how much of each ingredient to put in to the mix. It will also record how much was actually put in to determine if the driver is costing you money by overfeeding or by not feeding enough and lowering milk production. What gives me a laugh is that this is an American product that is ideally suited to use in confinement dairies that feed TMR. But as the salesman told us American dairymen have not been too keen to buy it.



What would I do different in the U.S.?

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This is a harder section for me to write because there are so many things that I would like to incorporate into a U.S. dairy and not a whole lot I'd like to change. The system Ben uses is simple to understand, requires less labor, and minimizes time spent milking. I didn't realize how nice it was to only milk for two hours at a time until I experienced it. It allows you to keep your concentration better and keeps whoever is milking from getting burnt out because of the amount of time that is left during the day to do other things. This is ideal because it makes sure that things around the farm that need attention or repair get it instead of hiring another worker. That is the mentality that makes a farm sustainable: fix the problem before it becomes major.

One real advantage I can see in the U.S. is our low costs compared to New Zealand. When looking at their feed costs it is easy to see that it takes some very careful balancing of supplements to keep the profit margin competitive. It is obvious with the costs associated with purchasing equipment and supplies why New Zealand farmers have been practicing low cost rotational grazing for so much longer than we have.

But if you think that New Zealand farmers don't face some of the same challenges as Americans than think again. For the short period I have been over here, there has been maybe one or two days that it has not rained. It makes it challenging to move cows and decide where to put them with the risk of destroying the paddock. Soon I will see how their summer proves to be.