

Vancouver Island Holstein Club Barn Day

On August 7th, the VI Holstein Club held its annual Barn Day and picnic, welcoming almost 200 producers and industry people from around the Island and the Fraser Valley. There were two tour stops at this year's event, to visit two very different projects.

Amanda Poelman

Meadow Green Farms – Duncan

The Vanden Dungen family showcased their recently installed DariTech Sand Cannon Bedding Recovery System. Meadow Green switched to sand bedding roughly 10 years ago to lower their somatic cell count and because it was becoming more expensive to find good, dry sawdust on the Island.



John, Pete and Adrian Vanden Dungen are happy with the success they've had with the new sand cannon.



Sand-Free manure was the goal of the Sand Cannon Bedding Recovery System, for ease of hauling at Meadow Green Farms.

While the switch accomplished the original goal, fast forward 10 years, the Vanden Dungen family were looking to make their operation more economical. "There were two reasons we wanted to get a sand separator," says Pete, "First for manure management, and second for a constant supply of bedding." Pete, along with his dad John and Uncle Adrian, noted that one of the biggest challenges of sand bedding was dealing with it in the manure while spreading in the spring. Separating makes hauling much easier and is better for the equipment.

Together with Pacific Dairy Centre in Chilliwack, a supplier of DariTech, a plan was created to adapt the current system at Meadow Green. The first part of the job required a major upgrade in the power supply, followed by building a concrete pad for the cannon itself to sit on. With some outside help, the Vanden Dungen family did a large portion of the work themselves. "We live about six hours from the dealer," says Pete, "making it important to take on more ourselves, so we knew how all the pieces fit together."

The process itself has two steps: the piston pump moves the manure from the collection pit to the sand cannon, where it uses reclaimed water to clean and separate the sand.

The cannon was fired up in September of 2023 and, despite some initial challenges, has been working quite smoothly. "Troubleshooting problems is definitely a learning curve," says Pete, "but once you get a handle on what all the alarms mean, it certainly gets easier!"

The Vanden Dungen family already noticed a huge difference during their spring manure hauling and were also pleased that the somatic cell count didn't fluctuate at all with the introduction of reclaimed bedding. Although they still buy some sand to top up the pile – five times a year instead of every two weeks – Pete is confident that less sand will need to be purchased over time. When it comes to having a steady supply of bedding and having sand-free manure to spread, at Meadow Green, it's mission accomplished!

J. William Wikkerink Farms – Cobble Hill

Bill, Gert, Cindy and Jason welcomed the guests to their new dairy barn at J. William Wikkerink Farms.

After several years of planning and touring other barns, the Wikkerink family broke ground on their new facility in May 2022. "We needed more space," says Cindy, "The cows were crowded, and we just didn't have enough help to get everything done in a day." Previously milking twice daily in a double nine herringbone parlour meant a lot of time in the parlour.

Considerations for the new barn included larger stalls, bigger crossovers, and wider alleys, allowing for better cow flow everywhere, and wide-open sides were incorporated for better ventilation. "It's becoming harder to find farm employees on the island," says Cindy. "Having a facility that can be run by one person if necessary was a priority." Manure management was also important as the Wikkerink family wanted to cut back on the amount of fertilizer required by doing a better job of utilizing their liquid manure.

When it came to choosing the robotic milking system, they were keen to stick with Island Dairy Services – the DeLaval dealer that has been servicing most dairy operations on Vancouver Island for the better part of 50 years. "We really like the individual teat attachment," says Cindy, who was surprised how quickly the robot figures out where to attach the unit. "Also having my service technician and friend, Bas Krauwel, living five minutes away, has been very helpful through the learning process."

The cows moved into the new barn on November 27, 2023, and adjusted quickly. "We had computer grain feeders in the old barn, so I think that really helped," says Cindy. The benefits to having more space were seen almost immediately as milk production went up in the first week!



Larger stalls, bigger crossovers and wider alleys have created good flow for cows headed to the three VMS 300 DeLaval robots at J. William Wikkerink Farms.

Currently 130 cows are being milked in the new facility and, with 180 stalls in the main group, the plan is to slowly increase that number. A special needs area of 20 more stalls and a sawdust pack has certainly allowed the cows to spread out! The old barn now houses dry cows and pregnant heifers, which alleviated stocking density issues in the heifer barn, making a rented heifer facility unnecessary.

With a new facility came some inevitable changes in management style. "There's definitely more watching the computer – keeping an eye on somatic cell and incompletes," says Cindy, "Now I spend more time walking through the barn, paying attention to the cows since they aren't coming to me in the parlour twice a day."

The fan manure management system has also been a huge improvement. "The liquid manure has been great for the grass crops," says Jason, who manages most of the field work at the farm. "We've seen a lot less burning due to the lack of solids sitting on the field." Additionally, the Wikkerink family has been able to sell their solids to local gardeners and a local landscaping company.

Both Cindy and Jason agree that the decision to invest in a new facility was the right move for the future of the farm. "We definitely needed a change in our old operation," says Jason. "The robots and manure management system has benefited our cow comfort, production and field management, but for me, also freeing up time to spend with my young family has made this absolutely worth it." Without a doubt, the new facility is paying immediate benefits to the family and cows!



Jason, Cindy, Gert and Bill Wikkerink enjoying their new facility.

Curious and content in the new barn.

