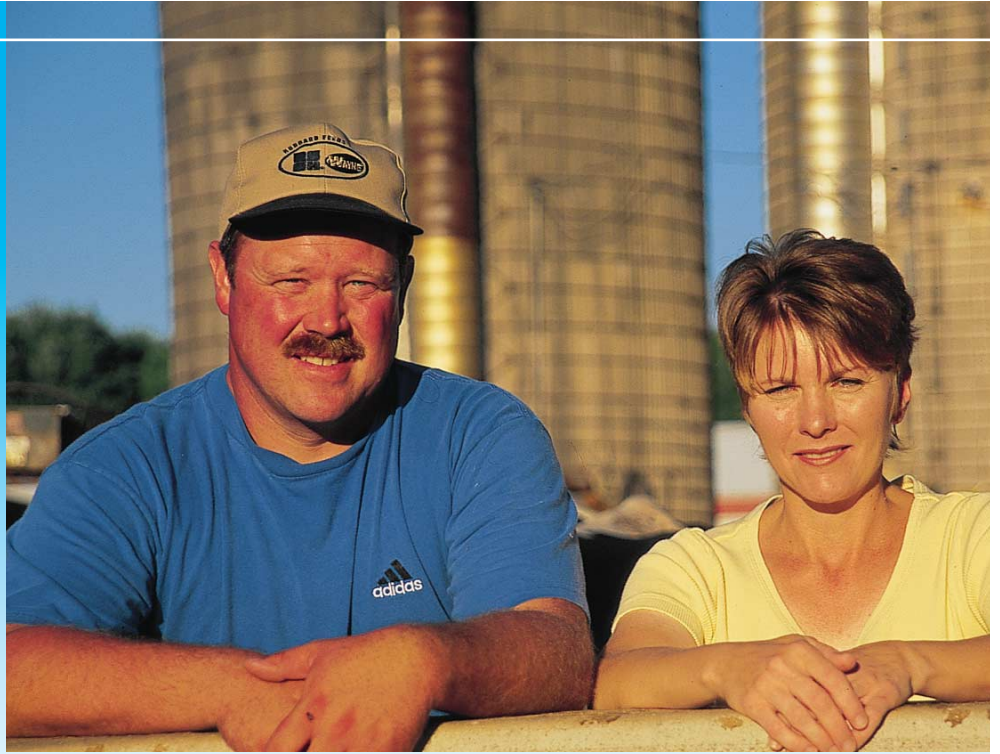


National Winner



Rebecca Meekhof (above) knows exactly how her parents, Ken and Ruby want the job done. This McBain, Mich., dairy makes cow comfort a priority. They added 40 stalls to make sure cows have a place to lie down.

Staying on Top

The winner's circle in the National Dairy Quality Awards program has become familiar territory for Ken and Ruby Meekhof. This husband-and-wife dairying team from McBain, Mich., captured first-place national honors in the 1998 contest, then followed up a year later with top honors in the Midwest Region.

This year, the couple has come back to repeat as national winners with yet another string of impressive quality-related numbers: a 12-month somatic cell count (SCC) average of 49,000 cells/ml, an average standard plate count of 1,167, and an average pre-incubation count of 1,167. Production average (2X) for the 143-cow herd during the same time frame was 25,580 lb. of milk, 793 lb. of protein and 1,083 lb. of fat. "I've always said getting to the top level of quality was the hard part," says Ken. "Staying there is relatively easy as long as you stick to a few basics."

Keeping their cows clean, dry and comfortable in a 170-stall freestall

barn is one of the basics. "We added 40 stalls to the barn last fall," Ken says, "even though we aren't planning a significant expansion."

"We wanted to make sure that the cows always have a stall to lie down." Sand purchased from a nearby ready-mix plant is the bedding of choice at this dairy. "The cows are just so comfortable

in sand," says Ken. "And bacteria does not grow in sand. I can't imagine using any other kind of bedding."

Ken's dad, Don, rakes and levels stalls during each milking. New sand is brought in once a month. Don also scrapes alleyways in the barn during the milkings. "Those might not seem like big things. But you can't shrug them off. You have to stay on top of them each and every day," says Ken.

Milking procedure is another focal point of the Meekhofs' quality effort. As cows enter the double-8 herringbone parlor, one of the two milkers hand-brushes udders to remove sand, dirt or manure. That's followed up with an iodine predip and drying with an individual paper towel.

On the rare occasions when a cow comes into the parlor extremely dirty, milkers will use water to wash the udder before applying predip. "When we do use water, we stress getting that entire udder dry before we put on the predip,"

NATIONAL WINNER
MIDWEST REGIONAL WINNER
Meekhof Dairy

Owners/Managers: Ken and Ruby Meekhof

Location: McBain, Michigan

**Nominated by: Jeffery Erdman, DVM,
Airport Animal Clinic, Cadillac, Michigan**

Herd Size: 143 cows

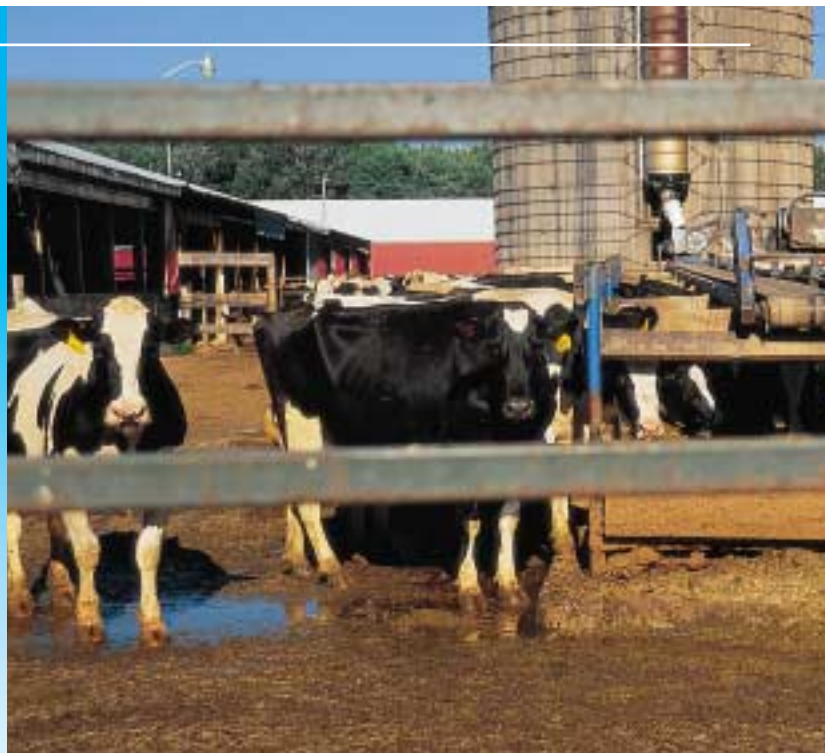
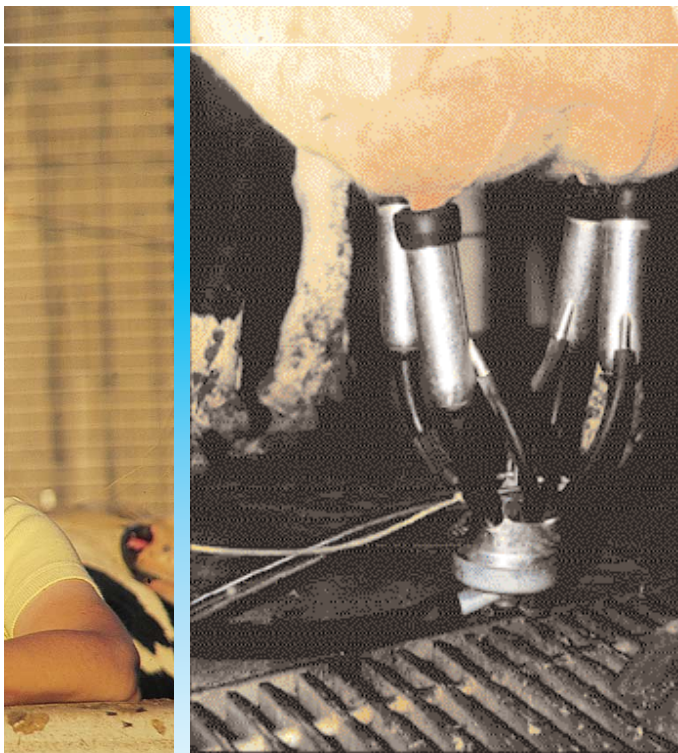
Production: 25,580 lb. (2X)

Somatic Cell Count (Avg. 12-month): 49,000

Somatic Cell Count (Low): 30,000

Somatic Cell Count (High): 80,000

Mastitis Cases (12 months): 17



An annual, complete equipment check is well worth the money, says Ken Meekhof. Cows are treated well and so are the employees. "We're really fortunate to be working with such good people," he says.

says Ken. "We don't want any water from higher up running down onto the teats when we attach the milking unit."

With both predipping and postdipping, the Meekhofs stress getting complete coverage of the teats. "Otherwise, why would you do it at all?" says Ken. The milking team consists of Ken, daughter Rebecca, and employees Rob Bright and Joe Schutte. "Everyone here knows how we want the job done," says Ken. "I always tell people that I've got the best employees around. They really pay attention to detail in the parlor."

Along with procedures, the Meekhofs also focus on parlor cleanliness and equipment maintenance. They have the milk hauler draw additional bacteria samples several times each week, then monitor results closely. "If we see counts going up a bit, we'll start checking things out to see what might be going on. Are we using enough soap? Is the water softener working properly? Is the milk hauler doing his job and keeping his equipment clean?"

The Meekhofs also contract with a local milking equipment dealer for a complete system check once a year. "It's money well spent," says Ken. "If your equipment isn't work-

ing properly, a lot of other things aren't going to work for you either."

Mastitis control is another anchor of the Meekhofs' approach to quality milk production. Ken relies heavily on monthly somatic cell count reports from DHIA to signal potential problem cows. "If we see a high count, we'll forestrip the cow at milking and look for signs of clinical mastitis," Ken explains. "If we find anything, we'll do a culture to see what kind of bug we're dealing with and then work out a strategy for treatment."

If nothing shows up in the forestripping, Meekhof still pulls the cow's milk out of the string. "We'll send a sample into the dairy lab with our milk truck

driver every day or two so we can monitor what's going on," he says. "But we don't want her milk going into the tank. Our experience has been that just two or three high-count cows can be responsible for 25% to 30% of our total SCC."

Ken and Ruby are quick to point to teamwork as a key element of their success. "It's not just Ruby and I," says Ken. "Everybody pitches in and does their part—my dad, our daughters [Rebecca, Sarah, Deborah and Emily], our employees, our veterinarian, our suppliers. We're really fortunate to be working with such good people."

Around the Meekhof dairy, the respect flows in both directions. "The Meekhof family is successful because they work hard and set high standards," says veterinarian Jeffery Erdman, Airport Animal Clinic in Cadillac, Mich. "From milk house to parlor to freestalls, this farm is immaculate and well maintained. Excellent management has resulted in milk of the highest quality. The Meekhofs are setting a high standard for our dairy industry."

For the Meekhofs, it's all part of a day's work. "Consumers want and expect quality," says Ken. "Our job is to make sure that they get it."

**MIDWEST REGIONAL
MERIT WINNER
Uhlenhopp Dairy**

Owners/managers: Philip and Carol Uhlenhopp

Location: Sumner, Iowa

**Nominated by: Charles Kottke,
Field Representative, AMPI**

Herd size: 45

Production: 24,069 lb.

Somatic Cell Count (Avg. 12-month): 72,000

Somatic Cell Count (Low): 39,000

Somatic Cell Count (High): 97,000

Mastitis Cases (12 months): 10