

Hanke family rebuilds calf facility after devastating fire

Family teamwork and industry research essential in helping family build a quality calf-raising facility

Four generations and counting, perseverance and hard work comes quite naturally to Hanke Farms Inc. in Sheboygan Falls. This dedication to agriculture has helped the Hanke family to build a thriving 720-cow dairy – and to rebuild quickly after a devastating fire.

The Hanke family farming heritage began in 1920 when the grandfather of Jim and Jack (current farm owners) came from Germany and purchased an 80-acre farm in Plymouth. Jim Hanke says the family's goal has always been to own and operate a true family dairy – and, today, that goal continues to be a reality, despite setbacks.

For Jim and his twin brother, Jack, who now own the farm with their wives, Bonnie and Dorene, quality farming was instilled from a young age. The two remember waking up each morning before school to milk cows and do barn chores. This early dedication to dairy helped the twin brothers team together to build the dairy even further. Hanke Farms has evolved to its current 1,600 acres, 720 cows, 600 youngstock and more than 100 calves.

"We're lucky that our farm continues to be a family farm," Jim says. "Our family has helped the farm to grow and to make it through the years."

Today, Jim and Jack run

the farm with the help of six full-time family members and eight other full-time employees. Each family member has an area of focus within the farm. Along with the two couples, Jim and Bonnie's son Jason and son-in-law, Jon Anhalt, and Jack and Dorene's daughter Heidi, son-in-law, Doug Taylor, and son Adam (who helps out part-time) all help the farm run smoothly.

"We all work together to keep the farm running," Jim says.

This family mentality was especially important when disaster hit the farm in 2008. After a day of giving thanks for what they had, Hanke

Farms was impacted by a fire that year – the night after Thanksgiving.

From the fire, the Hanks lost their entire greenhouse-structured calf facility, 100 heifer calves and a commodity shed.

"It was devastating," Jim says. "But we knew we had to rebuild."

Without hesitation, the Hanks began planning for a new and improved calf barn.

"Right away, we knew we wanted an improved building that was going to last a long time," Jim says. "Our calves are our future, so we looked into options that were best for the calves."

The Hanks purchased

outdoor calf hutches for a temporary calf housing solution while looking into their options. Other dairy producers in Sheboygan County also supported the Hanks by sharing interim calf housing.

"Our neighbors were very helpful after the fire and we're very thankful to them," Jim says, explaining that the temporary calf housing solution helped the family to explore their options for more permanent calf housing.

As a team, the Hanke family toured calf facilities in their area and consulted with industry experts and their local veterinarian to



Photo submitted

Hanke Farms Inc. is a family-owned and operated dairy in Sheboygan Falls with a deep history. A dedication to dairy and advice from calf facility experts helped the family team rebuild their calf facility after a devastating fire.

determine which type of facility would work best for them. Realizing that their decisions would impact the future of their herd, the Hankes looked for an option that would be convenient, promote calf health and reduce labor.

Ultimately, the team worked with Calf-Tel® housing experts and dealers to build a facility that meets these criteria and allows the option for further growth. The team's experience in calf housing helped the Hankes rebuild their calf facility in just a few months.

"When we're at capacity, we have about 100 calves, but we built the barn with the capacity for 144 individual pens," Jim says. "We built the barn larger with the intention to expand and increase our calf numbers in the future."

The new calf raising facility is a 280-foot-by-65-foot calf barn. Currently, there

are 120 individual Calf-Tel pens and 10 group pens (20-foot-by-24-foot) in the facility.

Each row of calf pens sits on top of pea gravel with tiles under the rows to capture any drainage.

"This setup has allowed our calves to stay healthier," Jim has found. "The calves stay drier, because moisture goes into the tile lines. With the system, there is also less ammonia in the barn."

The Hanke Farm calf care team is also pleased with the convenience of the system. Ten-foot wide aisles between each row of pens decrease labor by allowing a skidloader to go down each aisle when cleaning pens. A feeding cart with a tank that holds milk replacer also easily fits down the aisle.

"Feeding time is a lot easier now," Jim says. "We're able to drive a golf cart down the aisle with a tank on the back. Bringing the

cart in and feeding directly from that cart helps us to feed milk replacer to each calf at a consistent temperature."

Efficiency is further increased by the barn's collapsible pens.

"We wash pens after every calf and take out about eight or nine calves each week, so the idea of being able to take apart the pens was very important when we looked into building the facility," Jim adds.

After pens are taken down and washed, the area sits empty for two to three weeks, which allows for the area to dry before new calves enter the pens.

Today, the system is helping the Hankes to reach their goals in calf performance and efficiency. Calves enter the individual pens within an hour after birth and are moved to a group pen at 9 weeks of age where they remain until about 4

months of age. A wall separates the individual and group housing areas, which can be opened to allow for additional ventilation when needed.

The combination of the new calf facility and the Hankes dedication to calf care has helped the herd's future with a promising new crop of heifers waiting to enter the parlor. Jim credits the success of their calf raising program to health of the overall herd and the environment that the calves are raised in.

"When our calves are born healthy, there is no reason they shouldn't continue to thrive," Jim says. "Keeping our calves healthy allows us to have productive and healthy milk cows in the future. The new calf facility has been a great tool in reaching that goal."