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Work efficiency: a priority for *Ferme Barjo*

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Although Dominique Bard and Amélie Tremblay have been running the business on their own for less than a year, working efficiency has long been one of their priorities.

The owners of *Ferme Barjo*, a small, 42-cow dairy operation nestled among the mountains in the Charlevoix region, recently took part in a pilot project on work efficiency conducted by Valacta. How do they manage to reconcile their ambitious productivity goals and their life as a young family, while taking into account the financial constraints imposed upon them by the recent transfer of the business? We met with them to find out more.

Q: What led you to take part in Valacta's project on work efficiency in the barn?

Dominique: Efficiency is important in all aspects of the business. We like the idea of seeing where we stand in relation to others; it gives us an idea of what it's possible to achieve.

Why is work efficiency in the barn important to you?

Dominique: Our production targets for the herd are high because we know they are directly related to the operation's profitability. We want to implement the best possible management practices. The herd's Total Performance Index (TPI) has been 99 for the past three years. At the same time, we really want to maintain a balanced family life.

What do your facilities look like?

Dominique: We have a four-row tie-stall barn. We use a milk pipeline for milking. The herd is fed from wrapped round bales.

We use a bale unroller, and an automated feeder is used to feed concentrates to the cows and yearling heifers. Dry hay and straw are also in round bales, but we move those with a hand truck.

What have you learned from the project?

Amélie: That it isn't necessary to be big! We can be small and efficient when we know how to get organized.

Dominique: I was happy to see our results. With a little over nine minutes of work per cow per day, compared to 15 for the farms in our group, we were reassured about our way of doing things. Especially since we had neither automatic detachers nor rails at the time. We could see there was potential for improvement as far as milking and reproduction were concerned.

What is your approach to achieving efficiency in your operation?

Dominique: It's quite simple; the idea is to avoid having problems because it saves time. Our somatic cell count is around 100,000 cells/mL. Having fewer cases of mastitis means less time wasted with treatments and more milk shipped. The calving interval is 390 days: we avoid long dry periods and our cows produce more. All things considered, we milk fewer cows and have fewer heifers to rear. Because they calve young, our heifer inventory is lower and we avoid overpopulation problems. It's a "virtuous" cycle!

Do you have any specific time-saving strategies?

Dominique: We avoid putting two people where one will do, and we try to do certain tasks in one go when we can. As a part-time inseminator, I visit a large number of barns. If you knew how many places there are where someone wastes 15 to 20 minutes watching the chain during cleaning so that nothing jams. We installed a paddle wiper in our barn and it does the trick.

Another example: many producers select their sires as the cows come into heat. In our case, we take a half an hour to go over the proofs when we get them and we don't look at it again.

And finally, we use tools as simple as an agenda to plan our activities. Everything is there: professional and personal appointments, meetings, family activities, etc. We've gotten into the habit of setting up meetings with our advisors and suppliers in advance. It's a question of respect.

Why is setting up appointments so important to you?

Dominique: When you start doing something and you're interrupted all the time, you lose track of what you're doing and the work doesn't get done. On the other hand, meetings with our advisors are important; we want to be well-prepared and we want to take as much time with them as we need. Hurried discussions in the doorway aren't going to get us anywhere.

Have you made any changes since taking part in the project?

Dominique: We modified our milking equipment last May. We installed six milking machines with automatic detachers, a rail system and double carriers for the milkers. The milk pipeline was modified with the installation of double inlets. I must mention that the project was already pretty well finished when we got our results. They validated our decision.

Why did you invest in the equipment if your results were already very good?

Dominique: The work was efficient because I was milking the cows by myself with six units. It was quite demanding even if I left some of the units on hold a certain times during milking. The new equipment has allowed us to standardize our milking, regardless of who does the job. It's also less physically demanding with the rails: Amélie, the student in training, or a casual employee



"The herd is fed from wrapped round bales," says Dominique Bard of *Ferme Barjo* in the Charlevoix region. "We use a bale unroller, and an automated feeder is used to feed concentrates to the cows and yearling heifers."

can maintain the pace with six units. We could put this investment in the "comfort and flexibility" category.

How did this investment fit in with your operation's financial picture?

Dominique: We opted to buy used equipment to limit the investment. It's in very good condition all the same. Purchase and installation costs amounted to \$22,000. That seems reasonable to me when you consider the benefits.

What are your priorities now with regard to work efficiency?

Dominique: Right now, we are looking for a way to increase our time off to four days per month. We need skilled labour to maintain the farm's performance during our absence, and we certainly can't afford that. We're very interested in the CUMO [farm labour cooperative] formula.

Are there things you would like to change but will have to stay the same for the time being because it would be difficult to justify right now?

Dominique: We would like to house our yearling heifers in free stalls...

Amélie: Our heifers already calve at 23 months and weigh 640 kg at calving; since the work is already efficient, it would be

hard to justify investing in a building!

Dominique: There are also the round bales that we would gladly trade for a silo, but there's no question of investing in machinery, and custom work is rare in our area these days.

What aspect of this project did you like the most? The least?

Dominique: We liked the way the results were presented to the group. Discussions with other producers help us move forward. We probably could have gone even further with the data from the project if we had had more time together. On the other hand, collecting the data was demanding. There were a lot of things to think about and we had to take the time to do it.

Would you recommend that your producer friends go through the same exercise?

Dominique: It's certainly worth the effort, provided you want to improve. Having data on your farm and being able to compare yourself with others is important so you can see where you stand and set your priorities for the future. We don't look at the reports as an assessment of our value as individuals, and it's up to us to use the results as we see fit.

