



The kerchief revolution

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Since October 2014, Valacta has been working to set up a milk recording service in two dairy oblasts in Ukraine: Dnipropetrovsk in the west and L'viv in the east. This major undertaking, in partnership with SOCODEVI, a network of cooperative and mutualist organizations that shares its knowledge and technical expertise with partners in developing countries like Ukraine, is literally a cow-by-cow effort.

Ukraine is one of Europe's breadbaskets, with prime farmland and recognized expertise in wheat production, but dairy production is an entirely different story. While the dairy herd improvement program here in Quebec is compelled to innovate and reinvent itself to meet the needs and expectations of an evolving industry, the situation in Ukraine is such that the milk recording reports provide critical and unhelped-for information for herd management.

A bit of history and a snapshot of the Ukrainian dairy sector

After the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s, the large state-run agricultural cooperatives, called kolkhozes, were closed, with the livestock and farmland divided among the workers. Today, these farmers cultivate their small plots of land to produce cabbage, potatoes, corn and dill for household consumption. Their one or two cows are housed in a small dimly-lit building, with no ventilation, alongside a pig and a few hens. In winter, the cows



Étienne Tremblay and Joane Blais, from Valacta, with the group of technicians from Dnipro.

are fed pumpkins and blackened hay. They are hand-milked to provide milk for daily needs, and a white cheese is produced for household consumption. Surplus milk (raw) is sold on the market in recycled water bottles: 2.5 to 3 grivnas per litre (about 16 cents). Farm size varies widely, from the household farms mentioned above to small farms with 10, 30 or 50 cows, to large-scale operations, with 400, 800 or a few thousand cows, predominantly housed in old dismal concrete kolkhozes. But, remarkably, 75 per cent of the volume of milk produced in Ukraine comes from the very small family farms, run by babouchkas (elderly women) wrapped in aprons and flowered kerchiefs.

Our commitment, our expertise

Valacta's mandate is to provide support and training to two teams of dairy

technicians until 2018. These teams will, in turn, use that knowledge to help local dairy producers improve their production. Our commitment is structured around three main themes:

- translating and using our tools, such as Lac-T, Ration'L and our Vision2000 reports;
- setting up two laboratories for milk quality analysis and, soon, GestaLab; and
- providing training to two dairy production technicians on various topics, including forage quality, mastitis, herd management, housing and comfort, and customer-centric service.

Our experts transfer their knowledge through classroom and on-farm training sessions, which could not take place without the invaluable collaboration of dedicated interpreters. As we become better acquainted, the producers are

able to better articulate and define their needs. Farm visits tell us a great deal about their priorities and their mastery of the concepts. Producing good quality forage, reproduction, feeding, and milk quality all present challenges to these producers, but the biggest hurdle is the absence of a decent milk price that would enable them to reinvest in their farms. The machinery base dates back to the Russian occupation, veterinary services are either nonexistent or based on outdated methods, and, other than Danone Ukraine, no milk processors are prepared to invest in quality. This paints a sombre picture, but hope for better days resides in the upcoming generation of motivated producers and the continuing contribution of financial and human resources to the project by many countries, including Canada and SOCODEVI.



A former kolkhoze has been refurbished with new fenestration and ventilation.



This rugged farm is home to 16 cows of various breeds, 11 that are currently hand-milked by two women who deserve our utmost respect.

VALACTA – Dairy Production Centre of Expertise



Portrait of the Ukrainian dairy industry

- Population: 42.8 M
- Number of cows: 2.14 M
- Annual milk production: 10-12 M tonnes
- Average production per cow: between 2,500 and 3,500 kg
- Average milk price: \$0.29/L (varies from \$0.16/L for small farms to \$0.35/L for large farms)
- Main indigenous dairy breeds: Ukrainian Red-and-White, Ukrainian Black Pied, Ukrainian Whiteheaded, Red Steppe

Sources: Eurostat 2015, Infagro, FAO 2013 and unverified data



Robert Berthiaume also offered training sessions on forage quality to local producers.

One solution: Dairy cooperatives

The main goal of this project is to set up village dairy cooperatives to increase income from milk production and raise the standard of living for these communities. Small milk tanks, from 300 to 800 L, are installed in the villages and managed by a producer appointed by the board of the cooperative. This volume of milk is sufficient to make it worthwhile for a processor to come and collect it. Unfortunately, only Danone Ukraine offers a quality premium, \$0.03/L, when the SSC is below 400,000. Nonetheless, this small incentive is enough to spark a desire to improve quality.

Pasture improvement

In village areas, most of the cows graze all summer in community pastures, which are grasslands so old they haven't seen a harrow in decades! In the spring of 2016, Valacta and SOCODEVI joined together with a plan to enhance the quality of these pasture lands. Robert Berthiaume, a forage systems expert at Valacta, provided training for the dairy technicians, who were then to apply their newly acquired knowledge in a cooperative of their choice. Now that the grasslands have been successfully restored, the next step is to improve grazing management during sensitive periods and ensure access to sufficient quantities of clean water.

The babouchkas in kerchiefs will soon be ready to hand over the reins to their children. Our hope is that this new generation of producers will be eager to seize the opportunities afforded by milk recording to improve the quality of life of their families and their communities.



Jean Brisson, our nutrition expert, goes over Lac-T reproduction reports with the farm owner and three technicians from L'viv.



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