

# Handling the Stresses of Farming: A Personal Approach

By Janet Parsons

The custom combine operator arrived eight days ago at 4 p.m.. After doing three hours of combining, he parked the machine in the shed and it hasn't been moved since. And, like everywhere else in the province, it's still raining. All I need is three days of sunshine. Is that too much to ask? The flip side is that the cows are vaccinated, the shed is cleaned, the tractors are all serviced, and I've even done some housecleaning.

The business of dairy farming is certainly riddled with stresses. But they are generally long-term and, to my way of thinking, controllable. My philosophy is to deal with situations to avoid crisis. It's preventative maintenance on all levels. When it comes to crops, it's more difficult, but planning and risk management pay off.

I'll give you examples of what I mean by using the main management areas:

## Milk Supply

In order to maximize our income we've got to ship full quota. To ship quota we have to have enough milk all year round, and thus enough cows milking.

**Solution:** We have a breeding chart which shows visually how many cows are calving year round and that all cows are pregnancy checked. Also, we allow for problems. I budget to ship 15% more milk than my quota allows. If all goes well, I pay the overquota levy and count myself lucky. The nice thing is that when things start to go awry, I know I have that cushion and that let's me sleep at night.

There was a time when I didn't count on milk from any fresh cow until she had milked for two weeks because everything was going wrong. After the sixth cow died or was shipped within six weeks because of various ailments from A to Z, the vet said, "That's it, now everything will be okay. You won't lose any more." And we didn't.

## Crops and Equipment

In order to minimize expenses we've got to get the crops planted, fertilized and harvested on time. Equipment breakdowns during harvest put me in a stress overload mode.

**Solution:** All equipment is put away at the



end of the season repaired and oiled, ready to work next year. And during the season equipment is maintained on a regular basis. I have no control over the weather, so I don't get really stressed when it rains at the wrong time.

But what I do is try and put the balance on my side. All our land is tile drained so it takes only 24 hours to recover from a half inch rainfall and we're back in the field. Also, we use an alfalfa/timothy mixture for forage so even in drought conditions we have excellent second cuts. We're also using round bale haylage so we don't have to wait for hay to dry. All of these things have served us well this year.

Our only problem has been having to wait in line for the custom combine operator. Two of my neighbours and I have been considering putting together a syndicate to own our own combine. That'll really tip the scales our way when it's time to harvest the grain.

## Labour

An efficient and considerate use of labour makes the farm a positive place for family and employees.

**Solution:** Outline the job as precisely as possible. Our main employee has been with us for sixteen years. She does chores (milking and cleaning and feeding the cows, heifers and calves) five days each

week. She works from 6 to 9 a.m. and 4 to 7 p.m. and one morning a week doing related activities. Leona works exclusively with the dairy herd (42 milking, 80 head total). Her vacation is composed of two weeks plus 10 additional mornings taken at random throughout the year, and she also gets most statutory holidays (not May 24th or July 1st due to our need to complete field work).

Here again I emphasize communication. Every three months Leona and I go over the dairy operation and list what needs to be done or what area can be improved. For example, she and I took hoof trimming courses so we could take care of problem cows. Just picture two women wrestling with a 1500 pound holstein cow who has no intentions of getting her toe nails clipped. It's rodeo time at Parview Farms!

When I mentioned to Leona that I was writing this article, she commented on the stress she feels to keep production on track and somatic cell and plate loop counts down. Four gold seals in a row for quality shows the kind of pride she has in her work, but with that also comes stress.

Knowing the concerns of the people who work for me (including family) makes it much easier for all of us to work on a day-to-day basis. And I feel comfortable leaving the farm in their hands. We share a common goal and knowing that they'll pitch in and help without contest is comforting.

## Financial

I've discussed milk production, crops, equipment and labour. But in the end the main stresses in most farm operations are financial. The situation was no different here as we got established.

**Solution:** Planning is essential to farm financial health. We have always used cash flow projections and then compare actuals to projections on a monthly basis. [It helps to have an accountant as a husband!] When the cash flow is prepared, all projected capital purchases - equipment, tile drainage, quota, etc. - are included. Actually, in my case, if it's not in the cash flow, forget it. I never buy on impulse or in a hurry.

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