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Company's Technology Replaces Cow's Passion When Breeding Cattle

Profits Depend On Steady Supply Of Pregnant Cows

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Monday, October 1, 2007
By Ellen Williams-Masson

The birds and the bees are passe, at least for bovines.

More than two-thirds of dairy cows in the United States are bred by artificial insemination, superseding passion-on-the-hoof as a means of herd improvement and propagation.

As the world leader in bovine genetics and reproductive services for both beef and dairy cattle, ABS Global in DeForest has taken the market by the horns since its modest beginnings in 1941 as American Breeders Service.

Founded on the belief that elite sires create superior bloodlines, ABS Global uses progeny-tested bulls to produce more than 10 million doses of semen a year, distributing uddercare and reproductive products in 80 countries and employing about 3,200 workers worldwide.

Jady Grad, vice president of North America for ABS, said the company's success is based on the "combination of a high quality product and high-caliber people," creating a complete reproductive management system that adds profit to dairy and beef operations.

"Many of these producers are very busy with a lot of other activities, yet reproduction is important," he said. "We'll say to them, 'Let us take care of your reproductive needs - we're your experts.'"

Profit margins depend on a steady supply of pregnant cows, making reproductive precision a key component of the bottom line. The three Ripp brothers at Ripp's Dairy Valley near Dane have relied on daily visits from an ABS technician to breed their cows and keep the milk flowing for more than a decade.

The dairy also works with a genetic mating system technician every month to plan matings for their 780 Holsteins, ensuring an adequate supply of semen on hand and the best genetic match for each cow.

\ Computer is matchmaker

"We'll go off pedigrees and how the cow looks, and they'll throw that into a computer, which will tell them the best bull to use to breed that cow," Chuck Ripp said.

"It saves me a lot of time, because I don't have to learn all the pedigrees and bulls. They have a good lineup of bulls to choose from, so it's been working really well."

With 2,100 bulls housed in the United States, Brazil, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, ABS is expanding its American operation with a 240-acre site located 15 miles north of DeForest.

The new facility, called ABS Global Dekora, will house an additional 320 young bulls at various stages of progeny testing, a four-year selective process that culls 90% of potential sires and ensures that only the best bulls carry the flag for the dairy and beef breeds.

During progeny testing, semen is collected from bulls when they reach puberty at about 12-14 months of age and used to impregnate a random sampling of cows in herds across the United States. Data is collected from the female offspring of each bull tested when the cows calve, including information about fertility, conformation and milk production. The aggregated data provides a comprehensive genetic evaluation of each bull.

Only the cream of the crop, genetically speaking, survives the extensive progeny testing and graduates into the production herd at ABS. Bulls are generally five years of age before entering the ABS lineup and often retire at the age of 10. Sampling

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frequency depends on supply and demand as well as individual physiology, but the typical bull generates more than 100,000 doses of semen a year and can be worth millions of dollars.

\ Bulls located worldwide

Roger Breunig, global livestock facilities manager, said the Dekora facility would allow for an annual increase of 80 bulls into the testing program, bringing to 310 the total number of bulls sampled at facilities in North America each year. The first bulls should begin arriving at ABS Dekora in November.

"Because of biosecurity and things like natural disasters, it's smart for us not to keep adding bulls to the same location to ensure that those animals and our business are taken care of," Breunig said.

Having multiple facilities across the world helps the company spread out its risk, and Breunig said that one of their biggest fears is the germs "people drag in off the street" on their shoes and clothing. Consequently, each barn is maintained as a separate herd with strict hygiene protocols, and visitors are separated from the bulls by glass during tours.

The DeForest barns house a total of 800 bulls, with Holsteins and other dairy breeds making up about 85 percent of their business.

Dairy operations are more apt to rely on artificial breeding than beef breeders because the cows are in the milking parlor at least twice a day, making it easier to know when it's time to breed.

ABS also leads the global market in genetic material for popular beef breeds like Angus and Simmental.

\ Economy has an impact

ABS Global is part of the bovine genetics division of the British company Genus , which reported an operating profit of about \$33 million for the bovine division in fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Grad said milk prices and other market trends that hit farmers in the wallet impact ABS when clients are "shopping up and down our product line." Semen samples retail for \$16-\$50 each, and some bulls in high demand garner as much as \$85 a dose.

"When a client is doing well financially, they are more apt to purchase on a middle to an upper end of your product offering," Grad said. In tough times "they are still going to breed their cows, and they are still going to use semen from us - our units don't decline," but clients choose the lower-priced products.

Former President and CEO Bob Walton implemented many of the reproductive and marketing strategies that have made ABS a global leader in bovine genetics. Walton was hired as a young geneticist in 1962 to develop ABS's dairy breeding program and quickly scaled the corporate ladder, serving in the top spot from 1968 until he retired in 1991. He is currently a consultant for ABS and raises purebred Simmental cattle.


"I'm the only bull out on the farm," Walton said with a chuckle. Walton shaped the modern standards for the beef and dairy industries by the sires he selected from around the world while at the helm of ABS Global, and he described the company's future as "fantastic."

"They are on top of the world," he said.


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