

Fertility-focused management at Schleis Farms

Progressive Dairy Editor Matti McBride

AT A GLANCE

A dedication to improving fertility has shaped the way Ryan Schleis manages his Fleckvieh herd in Wisconsin.

Sometimes thinking outside the box can pay off in ways you don't anticipate. Agriculture is usually a high-risk, high-reward venture – and for Ryan Schleis of Schleis Farms, switching a Holstein herd to Fleckvieh was an investment he was willing to make in exchange for higher fertility.

What started as an interest in his wife's – Tasha's – research paper on fertility in different breeds of cattle during her time in college sparked a decision that would change the way Schleis manages his 500-cow herd. Tasha's study abroad, exposure to European dairy breeds, multiple conversations and research led Ryan Schleis to a decision to switch the Wisconsin-based Holstein herd to Fleckvieh in 2008.

"We were really interested in the benefits that Fleckvieh cows gave us when it came to body condition, hoof health and reproduction," Schleis says. Milking Fleckvieh are known for exactly that – slightly heavier body condition, improved fertility and sound feet and legs. This breed was originally developed in southern Germany as a triple-purpose breed – used for milk, muscling and work.

Schleis Farms' herd is currently 80% Fleckvieh, 10% Jersey and has a few Holsteins sprinkled in the mix. Schleis owns and operates the dairy and 1,100 acres alongside his

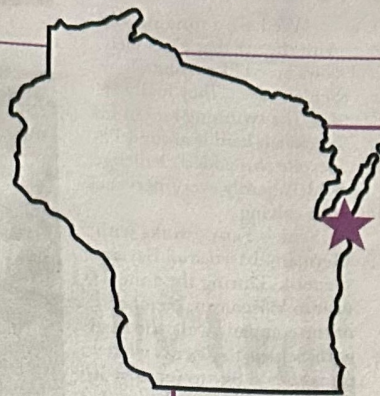
parents, Steve and Denise, and aunt and uncle, Julie and Marvin, in Kewaunee, Wisconsin.

"Fleckvieh are extremely fertile animals," Schleis says. "My current voluntary waiting period is 79 days in milk, but I breed a lot of animals earlier than that – some of them in the 40- to 50-day range."

Fertile they are. With a conception rate of 58% and a pregnancy rate of 41%, Schleis does everything he can to capitalize on fertility. This includes implementing a new bolus technology.

"We invested in smaXtec in May of 2023," Schleis says. "We see 73 percent of our breedings from this system, and the rest are standing

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Schleis Farms

Kewaunee, Wisconsin

Breeds:
Fleckvieh,
Holstein, Jersey

Acreage: 1,100

Conception rate: 58%

Pregnancy rate: 41%

Rolling herd average: 23,000 pounds
(4.6% fat, 3.6% protein)

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The current herd at Schleis Farms consists primarily of Fleckvieh animals.

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heats, if seen, or synchronization protocols." Schleis executes a CIDR-Synch on any repeat breeders and a G6G program on animals that do not show heats. Prior to using the animal monitoring system, G6G was a standard protocol for the herd.

"I've enjoyed working with Schleis Farms and seeing the tangible difference smaXtec can make on dairies," says Allissa Frisley, smaXtec dairy management adviser. "Ryan's commitment to identifying cycling cows more efficiently and ensuring timely breeding of eligible animals has made a significant impact on their reproductive success."

Heifers selected to join the milking herd receive a bolus at 12 to 13 months old and are bred based on activity monitored by the bolus.

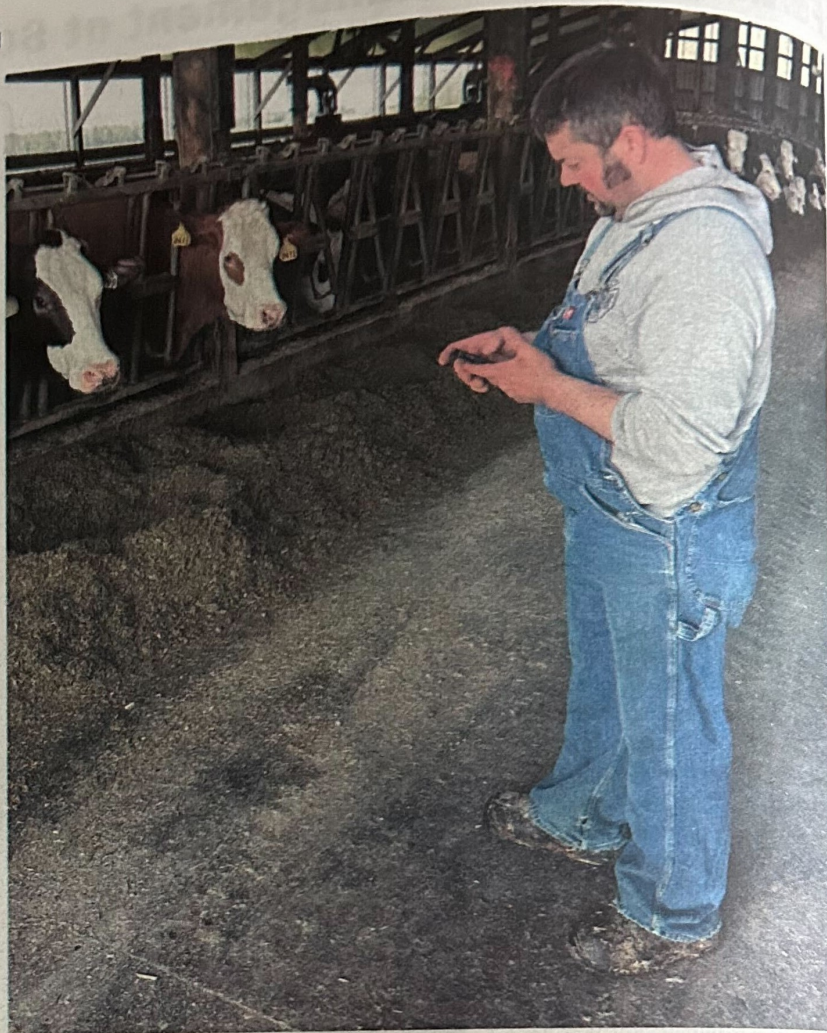
This technology not only monitors reproduction-related activity, but body temperature, water intake, rumination, mastitis events and – to Schleis' surprise – calving alerts.

"We get a half-day warning prior to a cow calving," Schleis says. "That's a benefit we didn't really anticipate but really appreciate. This system is also really good at picking up cystic cows and non-cycling cows." Schleis monitors this by referring to a chart that illustrates the cycle of each cow. When he sees one a little off, he puts her on the list for the veterinarian to check.

"We have a running joke with the vet that Fleckvieh cows breed like rabbits," Schleis says. "They really do." The twinning rate in his Fleckvieh herd is around 7%. Despite this added challenge, Schleis hardly ever intervenes with calving.

Schleis Farms works with Germany-based stud Bayern-Genetik. During the annual visit to Wisconsin, members of the company walk the herd with Schleis to discuss what traits they'd like to improve in the coming year. Schleis will select six to eight bulls based on this visit, all with the intention of improving milk production and reproduction.

"We're always looking for more milk," Schleis says. "That's our main focus right now and why we've sprinkled some Holsteins and Jerseys in the mix." The herd is currently running a 23,000-pound rolling herd average with 4.6% fat and 3.6% protein. "We also are always looking to improve our reproduction," Schleis says. "Basically, give fewer shots, fewer interventions for the cow and breed off natural cycles." 🐄



Ryan Schleis uses an automated monitoring system to manage reproduction.

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