



Forward Thinking Farmers Host Pilot Project

By Amy Petherick for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

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Farm safety advocates, Jack Thomson and Rhonda MacDougall, became the first of several farmer owner/operators in Nova Scotia who are welcoming regulatory inspectors onto their farm to better understand and raise the profile of safe practices in the agricultural industry.

Their operation, West River Holsteins, was selected to be the first stop in a mock inspection tour of farms in an educational collaboration between Farm Safety Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

Thomson and MacDougall have been dairy farming since 1998 in Antigonish, Nova Scotia and today they milk 120 cows. It had always been the couple's goal to farm but, in 2007, that dream almost went up in smoke after the original facility was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

As dairy farmers, when rebuilding, their primary focus was on the cows. MacDougall explains that cow comfort is important, but they also aimed to improve occupational health and safety for the people who would work in the new barn. "Those things you put in place for comfortable cows is also reflective of employee safety," she offers.

With safer cattle handling in mind, gates were installed that are far easier and more ergonomic to use. The flooring in the old barn had been uneven and could prove to be slick but the new flooring is grooved to help with traction. The new barn also has better air quality, another feature that isn't just better for the cows, but for people "Air quality is significantly different from before; the ceiling is extremely high in our new barn, airbags are on the side of the barn so it's all controlled, and the temperature is set, which is really nice for employees too," she says.

For Thomson and MacDougall, all of their ideas about safety are based on practicality. They have first aid kits and fire extinguishers in all buildings, exemplifying the farm's focus on keeping a small incident from escalating into full blown disasters. They're also working to ensure all employees receive first aid, WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System), and confined spaces training. MacDougall says that peace of mind allows them to concentrate more on milk production and their cows.

"We all have moments of forgetfulness or inattentiveness, when we're rushing and we just need to get it done," she says. "We really want to provide as safe an environment as possible."

It was because of Thomson and MacDougall's commitment to safety that Carolyn Van Den Heuvel of Farm Safety Nova Scotia approached them to host the first mock inspection tour. Van Den Heuvel had worked with the family to complete a FarmSafe Plan in 2012 and later on through Farm Safety Nova Scotia training programs. Because of their history and the family's proven commitment to safety, Van Den Heuvel thought West River Holsteins was a perfect place to kick off this pilot.





Admittedly, there were nerves on all sides, both MacDougall and Van Den Heuvel confess. Although the intention was to keep the visit educational, it was understood inspectors would not be able to ignore anything which was an immediate danger. But in the end, the inspections went off without a hitch. Van Den Heuvel says that as many as 75 participants, including farmers, stakeholders and inspectors, attended the three sessions held throughout the province.

“The inspectors really wanted to take an educational approach and they really wanted to meet farmers in their element,” Van Den Heuvel explains. “I am really happy the Department of Labour is quite keen to support industry driven initiatives.”

Van Den Heuvel believes that as much as the attending farmers learned about regulatory compliance, the event also proved to be a real opportunity for the inspectors to learn about agriculture. “Things that we do as farmers, that we consider to be industry best practices, might not necessarily be on the radar of the inspectors because they’re generalists not specialists,” she says.

For example, Thomson and MacDougall could explain a lot about handling cattle and the safety features their facilities included, which some inspectors had previously little experience with.

“I think there was good conversation on both sides,” MacDougall explains. “It was good for them to see what kinds of challenges we face, that we all have to be aware of.”

Both MacDougall and Van Den Heuvel agree that the event did a lot to emphasize how everyone who was participating shared a commitment to safety improvements. This new found sense of common ground will serve as a strong foundation for more joint initiatives which are expected to take place later this year.

West River Cutlines

West River 1: West River Holsteins operates near Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Today they milk 120 cows.

West River 2: Farm safety advocates, Jack Thomson and Rhonda MacDougall were the first to welcome a mock inspection tour of their farm.

West River 3: The tours provided learning experiences for both farmers and inspectors.

