

Farm History and Executive Summary

Bill and Stacey Houseknecht, Bradford County, own and operate Knecht-Knoll Farm. This family's expansion plan and management practices evolved during their Transformation Team project. Prior to expansion, the Houseknechts milked 60 cows in a tie-stall barn. Initially, they saw a future in dairy that included robotic technology. Research included visits to robotic farms and meetings with a robotic dairy consultant.

While the project's feasibility study confirmed robotics as a viable option, local lenders didn't want to fund the robotic dairy. Bill and Stacey also realized that the study left little room for error, if there were volatile swings in milk or feed price. They re-evaluated their options, and decided a conventional free stall barn with parlor would best meet their risk comfort level and lender funding approval.

With the assistance of their Transformation Team, the family began modifying their expansion plan and broke ground on their new dairy in September 2012. Cows moved into the facility in February of 2013, with the new lagoon finished that May.

Today, the Houseknechts milk 180 cows in their double 8, fast exit parlor. The cows are housed in a freestall barn with curtains and fans for ventilation and sawdust for bedding improved cow comfort. An automatic manure scraper system was installed and decreased their manual labor. The family retro-fitted their existing tie stall barn for dry cows and also continues to milk fresh and sick cows in that barn as well.

The expansion has transformed management practices at Knecht-Knoll Farm. Bill and Stacey implemented standard operating procedures (SOPs) with their employees and strive to document practices in manuals. After the expansion, the Houseknechts also now use risk management tools, such as milk and feed contracts, another change in their business. Having learned from the planning process associated with their expansion, Stacey says, "Today, numbers are associated with everything we do on the farm. We almost have a mini feasibility study for every decision, whether it is buying a tractor or trying a new medicine."

