

Yahara Pride Farm Tour 2014 Recap

On Tuesday, August 26th, Yahara Pride Farms and Blue Star Dairy Farms hosted the second annual Yahara Pride Farm Tour. Although the 26th was the rain date for the event, we still received a great turnout, with many sponsors and community officials in attendance.

Growing up in California, and then moving to Minnesota at the start of high school, I had always lived close to farms, but I had never actually been on one. Needless to say, I was excited to see how such a vital part of our economy operates. The tour began in the calf barn, where we learned about the early life of the cows at Blue Star Dairy. I couldn't believe how big the calves already were, even though some of them were only hours old. We then learned about Blue Star Dairy's partnership with the Middleton manure digester and about their manure management plan. With nearly 500 cows, Blue Star Dairy generates almost 40,000 pounds of manure per day! I couldn't believe that one farm could generate so much manure. This manure is hauled to the digester where it is heated to the same temperature as a cow's stomach. This process separates the solid manure from the liquid manure, and the liquid manure is transported back to Blue Star Dairy. This liquid manure is stored in two manure lagoons, and is then applied when the fields actually need it. This process of manure application greatly reduces the amount of nutrient runoff compared to conventional manure application (and it also greatly reduces the odor, too!).

After viewing the manure lagoons, the tour moved into free-stall cow barns where attendees learned about the daily lives of the adult cows at Blue Star Dairy. The cows were much bigger than I thought they'd be up close and personal, but I was surprised to learn they were a little skittish despite being so big. After walking through the barn, we learned about other steps Blue Star Dairy has taken to reduce nutrient runoff. Catch basins, an essential part of agricultural water systems, were built near the manure lagoons to capture solids. The amount of sediment is greatly reduced after water passes through the catch basin, allowing farmers to reuse this water for irrigation. Catch basins also help prevent sediment from entering waterways. We also learned about a retention ditch that is used to prevent runoff from entering fields. Finally, we got to see where the magic happens: the milking parlor. We learned about the delicate timing balance that is necessary to achieve the best results when milking a group of cows, a process that is much more complicated than I could've imagined.

This year's Yahara Pride Farm tour was very educational. Every aspect of the tour, from the daily lives of the animals, to the conservation practices, to the milking process was extremely interesting. It was great to see that the conservation practices implemented at Blue Star Dairy are helping reduce their costs by creating a more effective manure implementation system, and by allowing them to reuse water from a natural source. Be on the lookout for information about the 3rd Annual Yahara Pride Farm Tour scheduled for the summer of 2015.