



Farm Grant Profile: Blue Ledge Farm

Background:

Since 2021, UVM Extension Dairy Specialists Whitney Hull and Kelsie (Meehan) Braam have been providing direct technical assistance to Vermont dairy farms as part of the Dairy Herd Management Technical Assistance (DHMTA) Program. Support is provided to farmers through direct consultations, including farm visits, workshops and longer-format educational programs. The DHMTA Team has expertise in herd health, milk quality, nutrition, grazing and pasture management, records analysis, and on-farm processing.

In the spring of 2024, farms that had previously engaged with the DHMTA program were invited to apply for grants of up to \$2,500 to support the adoption of a new practice or technique to improve overall dairy herd management on their operations. These small awards are intended to facilitate the trial of a new technology or practice to improve dairy herd management.

Six farms were awarded grants, and we'll highlight one farm grantee each month.

Blue Ledge Farm was awarded a grant to purchase 8 Waikato milk meters.



Blue Ledge Farm is a goat dairy in Salisbury, Vt. that manages a herd of 160 goats and produces farmstead goat and cow cheese. Since 2002, they have processed 100% of the milk produced on farm into their full line of cheeses, and purchase cow's milk from a small neighboring farm. Blue Ledge Farm is located on 150 acres and is conserved through the Vermont Land Trust.

Blue Ledge Farm was awarded a grant to purchase 8 Waikato milk meters. The Dairy Herd Management Technical Assistance (DHMTA) team spoke with Hannah Sessions, co-owner of Blue Ledge Farm, about their experience with the new equipment.

What management issue did this demonstration project address on your farm?

Blue Ledge Farm has been participating in a NE-DBIC grant-funded project studying the viability of extended lactation in dairy goats. Since April of 2023 at the onset of the project we have divided our herd into annual (300 day) and extended (700+ day) lactation groups, fall and spring freshening, and done monthly milk testing with DHIA comparing the volume and components of milk of the various groups. We also bred a group of goats artificially with imported semen collected

from herds across Europe that excel in extended lactation. The results have been so intriguing and exciting when it comes to the potential of extended lactation as a sustainable and economical method of goat dairy!

Because the NE-DBIC grant ended in April of this year, we needed to obtain our own milk meters to continue to be able to do most of our testing in-house with certified meters. Purchasing the milk meters allowed us to continue monthly milk testing, as the new group of goats that resulted from breeding with imported semen matures, and beyond. This, in turn, will help us make better breeding decisions as we pursue our extended lactation routine.



How did you track your progress or monitor your results during the project?

As I have done this past year with the extended lactation grant, I have continued to track the volume and components of milk in each subset of our herd (annual lactation spring fresh vs. fall fresh vs. extended lactation spring fresh) and log the information into a line graph for easy comparisons. I will also track somatic cell counts among the groups and do the same to tally results. Changes are easily monitored when I am able to test consistently month after month.

We measured the accuracy of the new meters by comparing meter readings with the volume of milk in the tank on test day. When we tested the other week, our tester was astounded at how accurate the meters were. The total

volume from the meters matched the tank volume to a hundredth of a point; they are leagues above all other meters in terms of accuracy.

Lastly, we tracked labor savings associated with using the new meters. I purchased 8 meters and we have 16 milking units, but milking on test day wasn't a whole lot slower than a normal milking because didn't have to mess with taking test tubes in and out of the meters. We saved about 45 minutes per milking compared to the old meters we used to use.

What were the findings from this project?

One important finding has been that our top producing goat is shockingly in her second year of lactation—she is 540 days in milk. We wouldn't have known that without this test. It's so exciting to see that happening. This finding gives us confidence in extended lactations. When we think about who to breed for next year, we'll base a lot of our decisions upon what this test showed.

We haven't received the SCC and components results from the latest round of testing yet, so we'll wait to see what we find with those.



What benefits or challenges did you experience?

One challenge is the cost of the meters. They are quite expensive (\$375 each), so the \$2,500 grant allowed us to purchase 8 meters, instead of a full 16 meters to match the 16 milking units we have in our parlor.

With 8 meters, we have to share each meter between 2 goats. I didn't know how much of a pain this would be, but it only proved to be a minor challenge. Even though it's a challenge to go from 16 to 8 milking units on test day, it's much easier to set up and break down 8 units instead of 16.

We experienced several benefits from using these meters. The new meters make testing easier, so it will be more likely that we'll be diligent testing regularly.

The Waikato meters have also improved our testing protocol, as they've brought accuracy to a whole new level compared to the meters we were using before.

Not only are they accurate to beyond a tenth of a liter, these meters allow you to take a milk sample without removing the test vial by pouring out the bottom, then they have a system whereby the milk in the vial gets sucked back into the pipeline. Clean and zero milk waste. There is even a way to agitate the milk before taking a sample by turning the nozzle different ways.

Testing day used to be a such a chore, and these meters are so fun and slick, so I think it will really help us immeasurably going forward. I would recommend these meters, and I'd be happy to show them to anyone who wants to see them.

Photo credits: all photos provided by Hannah Sessions of Blue Ledge Farm

Photo descriptions:

- *Milk sampling using a Waikato milk meter at Blue Ledge Farm.*
- *Blue Ledge Assistant Herd Manager Brooklyn Currier (left) and DHIA milk tester Jen Valley and the Waikato Goat Meters.*
- *Blue Ledge Assistant Herd Manager Brooklyn Currier (left) and DHIA milk tester Jen Valley and the Waikato Goat Meters.*

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