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Cherry Research Farm is a friend for area farmers



Andy Meier, station superintendent of the Cherry Research Farm, and the other 24 full-time employees of the farm spend most of their time working on innovative farming techniques. (NL photo by Jaenicke)

By Michael Jaenicke Staff Writer

Not all farms focus solely on producing a massive harvest. Andy Meier, station superintendent at Cherry Research Farm, says the primary concern of its 2,220-acre spread is helping small farmers increase productivity while doing it economically, and with environmentally friendly methods.

He says most people think the farm's purpose is to supply Cherry Hospital with vegetables and poultry. Those days are long gone.

Spend an hour or two with Meier, and you're likely to have a whole different perspective on farming — past, present and future — and the new, innovative ideas that are being used to grow food. Meier and the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) are not necessarily looking for the latest revolutionary invention as much as finding ways to help small farmers to better use their land and resources. He doesn't want to lose more farms in Johnston and Wayne counties. North

Carolina is losing more farmland annually than any other state in the nation. "That's the bad news. The good news is that we are finding ways to produce more with less," Meier said. "The trends are clear. Our farms are declining, and the acreage is decreasing." Cherry Research Farm is one of 18 research farms in the state. The partnership between CEFS, the Department of Agriculture, which owns the land, N.C. State University, and N.C. A&T University is almost too complicated to explain, short of saying that each have a hand in the farms. The farm has 25 full-time employees. During a given year, it is working on 30 to 40 research projects. "Sustainable agriculture is farming that is economically viable. It is responsible to the environment, which include concerns for water and soil, and is accessible to everyone," Meier said. Cherry Farms' research veins run deep into crop development, agri-forestry, organic farming, dairy, beef and poultry production, and much more.

Dairy advances

The dairy unit, which houses about 170 cows on about 330 acres, is currently examining grazing strategies and herd management techniques.

"We still want to produce milk, but with a little different philosophy," Meier said. "We milk in one area and keep the cows in the pasture the rest of the time, where they are healthier. We milk in an open area and use natural ventilation. It takes half the amount of equipment to do the same amount of work, and it's less sophisticated equipment. We don't feed them a lot of grain or handle a lot of waste.

Cows never receive antibiotics, and if one needs that type of treatment, it is retired from the organic herd.

"One of the challenging parts is fly control," Meier said. Instead of applying chemicals to the cows to control flies, they run the animals through a vacuum system.

"This method has the potential to get patented, because there's nothing like it out there," Meier said. The farm's swine unit is also using alternative methods to feed, reproduce, birth, and raise pigs. Five permanent hoop houses and pastures are set up for research and demonstration projects. Kevin Johnson, the Wayne County Cooperative Extension director, is thrilled by the work being done at Cherry Farm.

"In a word, it's awesome," Johnson said. "It's a great facility and a great partnership. They've helped us, and we've helped them. If you want cutting edge, you go there. There's so many things happening at once, and it's the go-to place for new and fresh ideas."

Between 2,500 and 3,000 people annually visit Cherry Farm during its educational outreach projects. Nancy Creamer, one of the co-directors of CEFS, said that the facility is known both near and far.

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"It's a player in research on sustainable agriculture on the national and international level," Creamer said. "It's one of the largest and most innovative research farms anywhere."

Beefing it up

The beef unit is located on 175 acres. The herd grazes on crop production land of marginal value. "Almost every farm has land that does not support high-value row cropping," Meier said. Cherry Farm is working on such technologies as crossbreeding, but is also involved heavily in distributing manure to pastures. These areas are then opened for grazing a little at a time. The idea is that it helps both the cows and the land. "Manure is a valuable resource, and it saves the farmer money, because he's not spending all that money on fertilizer," Meier said. "We also let the cattle graze there nearly year round."

Innovative swine methods

A moratorium on lagoons in the mid-1990s has led to different production ideas in the swine unit. The unit has five hoop houses for research and development. Pigs live in a deep bedding of straw, corn stalks and hay that is 14 to 18 inches thick. This controls odors and diseases from manure runoff, which affects water and soil quality. The mostly Yorkshire herd has been antibiotic-free for 30 years. Estrus synchronization and artificial insemination is used extensively. Goals of the unit are to minimize the use of water, labor and energy requirements, while maximizing the land use.

Going organic

The trend toward providing organic crops has been the fastest growing markets in the U.S. Cherry Farms has more than 100 acres dedicated to organic agriculture. While not every consumer can pay a higher price for organic products, it's become a venture that has a specific market. The organic research unit is working hard to find effective weed and insect controls and management strategies to enhance nitrogen cycling and soil erosion. The unit has a rotation of organic corn, soybeans, and hay. They are also introducing plants that are attractive to beneficial insects. Agriculture and nature work in conjunction in research being done in agri-forestry. Cherry Farm has a study where two types of pine trees and oak trees impact crops. How does shade affect crops? Does water from the tree roots hinder the crops? How necessary to the environment and crops is the carbon from the trees? Many of these questions will be answered only after long-term research has been completed. "What we try to do is to get people thinking about choices they make in their production by using methods that are economically, environmentally, and socially good," Meier said. "It's not an either-or, or two of the three, but a blend of these philosophies."

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