



Michael Santos, Tulare, Calif.

PROFIT THROUGH REGISTERED HOLSTEINS

Terra Linda Dairy commits to next-level genetic performance on their central valley farm.

It's a bright California morning, and Michael Santos pulls a worn notebook from his front-shirt pocket. With a careful eye, he appraises a group of Registered Holsteins®, scribbling down notes to identify milestones or areas of improvement.

Every piece of information, he has learned, contributes to future progress.

The fourth-generation dairy producer is driven by data. He spends hours analyzing performance reports, genomic results and pedigrees, as well as studying cattle in the parlor and out in the barns. It's knowledge made possible thanks to generations of Holstein breeders contributing records to Holstein Association USA.

"The genetic progress the Holstein breed has made over the years is amazing," he says. "Many calves we're calving in are from elite families, elite cow sires. And that's the end goal: to have a whole herd of elite animals."

Michael, alongside his brother, Craig, and father Mike Sr., run Terra Linda Dairy near Tulare, Calif., where they milk 1,300-head of Holstein cattle, and have a 33,275 pound rolling herd average.

Near the heart of California's rich, agricultural central valley, Michael's father and grandfather built the dairy

from the ground up. A drive down roads in Tulare County reveals nearly endless rows of cotton, almonds, pistachios, grapes and many other specialty crops.

After graduating with agricultural business and dairy science degrees from the University of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, Michael returned home with a mission in mind.

"...to take our genetic program to the next level," he says. "We'd always concentrated on genetics, but I wanted to accelerate that and our cows' efficiency. I felt like we were never going to be the largest herd, but I still wanted to maximize efficiency per cow unit."

The first step toward that goal was enrolling in Holstein Association USA's Start-Up program. It's an initiative that allowed them to increase the percentage of Registered Holsteins within their herd by building up grade Holsteins to registered status. The result is an entire herd that's now registered — and on track for the opportunities of the future.

"Registered Holstein cows add a premium to their value," he says. "When I market cattle, and when I have that piece of paper, it matters. It's not just an everyday, run-of-the-mill Holstein cow. We can tell you exactly where she's from, and can predict her future through genomics. To me, that adds value."

More Data, More Value

Registering cattle through Holstein Association USA has opened many doors for Terra Linda Dairy, including access to industry leading genomic information and performance data.

A commitment to continuous improvement is something they strive for with each animal.

“We genomic test every calf at birth with a Tissue Sampling Unit. The calves also get a Holstein tag and an official RFID coming straight from the Holstein Association,” Michael says. “We like to know where all our cattle are genomics-wise. We’re able to make management decisions based on that, whether we’re selling cattle, breeding cattle or using them for donors to make embryos.”

Access to predictive information through genomic technology helps define a calf’s future role within the herd, and its potential value.

Terra Linda Dairy has established an extensive donor program by using genomic data to identify herd outliers and potential donors that have desired traits for key measures like reproduction, health and type.

Michael says they are only able to find those ideal traits through genomic testing.

“To us, it’s worth the dollar investment you’ll make,” he says. “You get a predictive future on each animal, and it helps make decisions for us. The industry’s made several recent strides in it, and it’s become more reliable over the years. It’s a tremendous tool to have at your fingertips.”

The donor cows have developed a successful market for elite embryos from Terra Linda Dairy. The operation’s IVF program stays busy throughout the year, Michael explains, as they IVF about 20-25 donors every two weeks. They conventionally flush four to six donors about twice per month, as well.

“We want to keep progressing in the embryo market,” Michael says. “We’re putting in hundreds of embryos a month, and we’re working with other herds as well. Our goal is to keep pushing that forward.”

As science fuels greater precision in genetic selection, dairy farmers are seeing real results within the herd. Everything from improved udders, feet and legs, production efficiency and longevity.

This leads to profit and progress — a new vision for any dairyman wishing to grow and expand their herd more than they ever could before. And it is all linked to the registration issued by Holstein Association USA.

“It’s a good feeling when you wake up in the morning, and see the people on your dairy helping you achieve your goals, and you’re helping them achieve theirs,” Michael says. “It’s a team effort.”

Looking Ahead

By developing superior genetics into new calves every year, Terra Linda Dairy’s herd has become increasingly efficient. It is now the second highest producing dairy herd in the state of California, Michael says.

But the forward progress won’t stop here.

“I always thought that 30,000 lb. rolling herd average was the magic number, and that was as high as one could go,” Michael says. “Technology and genetics have come so far. And we’ve learned so much about the cow and how to take care of her better. With the quality of bulls that are available, it’s just unbelievable how you can make progress.”

He adds that their goal is to make a 1,000 lb. increase each year to the herd’s RHA.

That’s a worthy ambition, and one that will ensure the world’s refrigerators remain stocked with the safest, high quality milk and dairy products available.

“We love producing food for people across the world,” Michael says. “We take a lot of pride in knowing we can make food for people that can nourish their bodies. It’s a healthy product, we treat our animals with care, and we love what we do.”

