

QUEST for the Best

by Carl Kent

Sire Sampling Manager

Genex Cooperative, Inc.

Just as dairy producers are intent on raising high-quality replacements, Genex is committed to maximizing potential of the next generation of sires. Five years ago, the cooperative enacted a series of enhancements to its sire sampling program. The results of these forward-thinking changes are now apparent in the new crop of active sires.

QUEST: An act or process of looking carefully or thoroughly for someone or something.

- *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Since its inception, the objective of the QUEST sire sampling program has been to identify sires that produce profitable, productive, long-lived, reproductively efficient cows for our members.

Quality Cooperator Herds

Although the "quest" has not changed, the Genex program itself has undergone a number of changes. QUEST has evolved into one of the world's most efficient and accurate sire sampling programs.

Prior to 2001, there were over 4,500 sampling cooperator herds. At that size administration and evaluation was a huge, almost unmanageable, task. Through examination we were able to identify herds that purchased large quantities of QUEST semen and returned few, if any, milking daughters to bulls' proofs. Herds ranking poorly in this area were removed from QUEST.

Currently there are 1,576 active QUEST herds. With this number of herds, we at Genex can work more closely with the herds to ensure results. In conjunction, we increased the number of units of QUEST semen distributed to sampling herds by 25 percent. Quality - not quantity - usage was placed as a top priority.

With these cooperator herds, we implemented the following priorities for QUEST semen usage.

- 1) Use semen quickly, within a one-month time frame.
- 2) Accurately record the breeding.
- 3) Produce a pregnancy.
- 4) Identify heifer calves with unique USDA identification within 24 hours of birth.
- 5) Accurately-identified heifers need to calve and be on an official milk recording program in a timely basis

When new QUEST cooperator herds were added, quality was stressed. Herds applying for admission to QUEST had their records scrutinized on management practices, such as current level of correct identification, herd production and Somatic Cell Count. This places QUEST herds among the best in the country for management traits, thus allowing genetic potential to express itself to the fullest.

Increased Daughter Numbers

Changes implemented in 2001 are now yielding results not seen before in Genex history. Bulls' reliabilities for production and type, along with daughter numbers per bull, have reached all-time highs. Currently, Genex bulls average 87.7 percent Reliability by their third sire summary with 89 daughters per bull - far higher than the 50 to 60 daughters per bull sampled pre-2001. At this pace QUEST sires should average 100 milking daughters in their sire summaries and reach reliability levels of 90 percent or greater.

Accurate Identification

Increased reliabilities and daughter numbers are the end-product; however, do they still lead to accurate proofs? The answer is yes, if the daughters are accurately recorded with sire identification. Yes, if the "daughters" recorded in the bull's proof are truly sired by that bull.

In order to establish and monitor this accuracy, a parentage verification project was implemented at Genex four years ago. QUEST herds came back above the national average in correct identification, assuring confidence in proofs of Genex sires.

Lessons learned from DNA verification indicate the most common identification mistakes arise from:

- 1.) Wrong calf identified at birth.
- Most commonly occurs when more than two cows calve in the same area on the same day with heifer calves.

- 2.) A cow bred to multiple sires within 10 days.
- 3.) Incorrect sire entered at breeding, for example, 1HO7998 instead of 1HO7989.
- 4.) Gestation period does not match breeding date.
 - *Sire assigned to calf was the sire of last breeding that occurred over one year ago.*

Evaluating these areas in your breeding and record-keeping programs may help ensure accurate identification.

National Sampling

Changes in QUEST semen distribution were implemented to eliminate the possibility of "regional" sampling. Coast-to-coast sampling initiated the recognition of QUEST as a national sampling program.

Increasing sampling coast to coast was implemented with semen from all bulls being distributed nationally. The results are sires like 1HO7235 TOYSTORY who currently has 117 milking daughters - 26 daughters in the East, 73 in the Midwest and 18 in the West.

Lots of daughters, milking in many different herds and verified by DNA lead to accurate sire evaluations and fulfillment of our QUEST for the next generation of profit-making sires.

Benefits of QUEST

What do QUEST cooperator herds receive as benefits? They have the first access to young sires of the highest genetic level in the industry. Genex has sampled the highest Pedigree index group of sires for Lifetime Net Merit for well over six years resulting in the highest Lifetime Net Merit line-up in the industry.

QUEST incentives, in the form of credits to members' accounts, have totaled several million dollars over the past years. Currently herds enrolled in QUEST may receive heifer calf and/or milking daughter incentives up to six times each year - April and October for heifer calves, as well as the month corresponding to each USDA sire summary. Herds receive a \$12 incentive for each calf with unique identification in the DHI (Dairy Herd Improvement) system. Milking daughter payments can be as high as \$75 per daughter and are based on the USDA record weighting on their contribution toward their sire's proof based on his second sire summary. These payments rank among the highest in the A.I. industry.

Future

Where will the future take us on our quest? One trend I see would be fewer cooperator herds. Currently less than 300 herds do 66 percent of the sampling of Genex bulls. QUEST usage within herds has continued to grow as has the national herd size. Larger herds with higher contemporary numbers and less potential for preferential treatment enables genetics to be evaluated and expressed with increased accuracies. I predict little change in this trend.

Regardless, the need for high quality QUEST herds will continue. We would like to continue to add high quality herds to the Genex QUEST program. Contact your Genex representative if you would like to milk the early daughters of 20 high-ranking Genex sires like 1HO7235 Toystory, 1HO7127 Sharky or 1JE506 Lieutenant - and those that turn into breed-leading second-crop favorites like 1HO6149 Garter, 1HO5045 Lynch and 1JE1325 Bold. Join the best QUEST program in the industry.

Author Bio: Carl Kent has been Sire Sampling Manager for the past seven of his 13 years with Genex. Previously he served Minnesotaproducers as a Genex Area Programs Consultant, was a classifier for Holstein Association-USA and managed his own herd of cows.