

# Thai enterprise shows the way when it comes to diversification

Pioneers are often entrepreneurially led and this is certainly the case with the Thai dairy concern Farm Chokchai. International Dairy Topics recently visited this innovative company to see first hand what is happening there.

Farm Chokchai is located in Pakchong District, some two hours outside Bangkok, and encompasses 8,000 acres spread between several ranches. It has been innovative on many fronts but we decided to look into two specific areas – how it has created its own breeding programme to provide cows suitable for local, tropical conditions and how it has a novel ‘cash crop’ of visitors, 300,000 of whom paid last year to see a working dairy farm.

## Ranches with specific roles

These ranches have evolved specific roles dependent upon their size, soil type and location relative to the one holding the milking herd. The main Chokchai Ranch (CR1) contains the offices and holds the milking herd which is held in feedlots and zero grazes fresh grass. CR2 is dedicated to hay production, while the 3,000 acres of CR3 also produce hay and hold the heifer herd at pasture.

CR4, which is almost 4,000 acres in size, produces some hay plus corn for silage production, of which 12 tonnes a day is con-



*In the dairy parlour at Chokchai.*

sumed by the herd. In total some 80% of the land is pasture and 40% of this is irrigated by sprinklers supplied by the farms' own wells.

This farm is also the home to Chokchai's buffalo herd on which trial work with cloning is being undertaken to produce a 'Thai buffalo' that is suited to local conditions. At this location research and breeding

work is also being undertaken on optimising local grass strains for cattle consumption.

Typically the 3,000 or so head of cattle on the farm consume 12 tonnes of corn silage, 30 tonnes of Ruzi and Pangola hay and 14 tonnes per day of fresh chopped grass or corn. In addition, research is being under-

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**Left, cows waiting for milking and, right, feeding on the dairy lots.**





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taken with regards to the use of palms as a source of biofuels so that the farm can become self-sufficient in this context.

But self-sufficiency does not stop with bio-fuels. The company grows its own feed with the exception of some of the ingredients for the concentrate mixes used, it operates its own feed mill, with 80% of production being sold to third parties, it has its own veterinarians and engineers and it operates its own breeding programme.

The breeding programme is based on crossing a pure Holstein-Friesian on to a Holstein-Friesian x Sahiwal. The original Holstein-Friesians came from New Zealand with a subsequent top up from the USA.

By taking the resulting calves and again using the Holstein-Friesian semen the percentage of Holstein-Friesian has now been increased to 96.875% after several generations.

This product is better suited to the local conditions and has retained the original



**Strategically placed signs explain operational activities to visitors.**

traits of the Holstein-Friesian. It is known as the Chokchai Friesian.

So, what about the performance of the Chokchai herd? The herd averages 16 litres per cow per day on a year in year out basis. The best cows at the best time of year can reach 40-45 litres per day and the poorest cows at the worst time of year can be as low as 9-10 litres per day.

The farm operates its own bulls (currently 12) and regularly collects semen from them which is stored in straws in liquid nitrogen until it is required.

This then brings us to an unusual and very serious part of the company's business – the visitors. Daily semen collections are held for them in a small amphitheatre next to the AI laboratory and, typically, the Asian visitors show a loud appreciation when this performance comes to a climax!

But it does not stop there for the visitors. They can try their hand at milking a cow,

they can make ice cream and educational tours around the operation are conducted for them.

Many also stay the night on a special camp site that has been located in the forest in a less productive corner of CRI farm. In addition, regular 'cowboy shows' are put on for visitors and their shops are sited at strategic locations on the farm so that the company can maximise its income from each and every visitor.

Currently the farm produces 10 ice cream lines as well as its own yoghurt and 'milk candy'. This milk candy is a good way of introducing children who have not been milk drinkers to the taste of milk and is extremely popular with Thai children.

These products are sold through the company's own outlets – at the farm and at 16 locations in Bangkok. The intention is to increase the number of outlets and to open new ones in some of the other major Thai cities.

In addition, the company also runs three Chokchai Steak Houses and all the meat for these is processed through a centralised kitchen so standards can be maintained.

The structure of the Chokchai Group of Companies is divided into companies that manage the milking herd, are focused on education, involved in breed development and for the management of the various merchandising and retailing activities.

On the education front the activities fall into three distinct areas – an extension school where students from local colleges can come for several weeks of intensively focused dairy farm management training, an internship programme and proficiency training for people wanting to work in the sector.

Chokchai is a great example of how one can progress and diversify a dairy operation and the real plus is that every year thousands of Thais get to see first hand how a dairy farm operates and where their milk comes from! ■

***A Chokchai 'cowgirl' who is there to help visitors.***

