

One dairy's experience: Laparoscopic AI at Monkeyflower Ranch

Interview with Rebecca King, owner-operator of Monkeyflower Ranch and Garden Variety Cheese, Royal Oaks, California, July 2019.

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As many of you know, Lacaune semen from France was first imported to the U.S. in 2017. The importation was spearheaded by DSANA board member Tom Clark. Producers who have started to milk their yearlings from the 2017 breeding season are reporting significant increases in milk production. We are starting a series of reports on individual producers' experiences with LAI (laparoscopic artificial insemination) of the Lacaune semen. We start the series with Rebecca King of Monkeyflower Ranch and Garden Variety Cheese in northern California. Below is an excerpt of the interview with her; the full interview will be available on the DSANA website starting in July.

Rebecca King of Monkeyflower Ranch and Garden Variety Cheese in northern California was among the first purchasers of Lacaune semen straws in the U.S. She milks 100 East Friesian/Lacaune crosses just north of Salinas and produces aged and fresh cheeses and yogurt.

Rebecca ordered 20 straws in 2017, intending to artificially breed 20 ewes that fall. She ended up breeding 18 (more on that later) and had 19 lambs born from those inseminations. “We had 10 ewes carry to term, one of which died at lambing with her lambs. From what other people say, getting 19 lambs was not a bad percentage,” Rebecca says.

After ordering the straws a number of months in advance, she arranged to have the LAI done in September 2017 by technician Martin Dally of Oregon.

He is one of a handful of traveling ovine LAI technicians working in the U.S. Each technician has their own insemination process and recommendations for ewe management, and their protocols can vary substantially.

Rebecca chose to inseminate mostly older ewes, though a few of her younger ones were bred successfully. “I’ve heard you want to choose ewes that are not older than 5 years,” she says.



Some LAI technicians advise that the ewes be dried off before insemination. Some of her ewes were not dried off because of scheduling challenges, but they were inseminated successfully. Four weeks prior to Martin's visit, Rebecca put a "CIDR" into each ewe. CIDRs (Controlled Internal Drug Release) are an intravaginal progesterone insert, used to suppress estrus until the CIDR is removed, thereby synchronizing heat after the CIDRs are removed. Then a day before LAI, she removed the CIDR and gave each ewe a hormone injection. "For the hormones, Martin Dally sent me 15 doses of PMS-G (I don't recall the dosage) and I gave the others PG-600 (per his direction). A CIDR had fallen out of one ewe earlier, so she wasn't bred, and another ewe didn't get a hormone injection because it wasn't possible to get the last of the liquid out of the bottle." (Rebecca recommends ordering a little more hormone than you think you'll need.)

Those first AI lambs of hers were born between Jan. 28 and Feb. 1. "Your ewes are going to lamb within a very short window, so be prepared for that," she says.

Rebecca was pleased with the results of her AI experience. She calculates that between the straw purchases and Martin's fee, the cost was \$135 per ewe. She sold most of the ram lambs to other farms for \$600 each, and kept two. This fall she will be artificially breeding two dozen ewes and yearlings, using the 25 straws she purchased in 2018. (She didn't use the straws last year because she wasn't able to schedule a visit with Martin, but the frozen straws are still viable.)

"Plan ahead and try to get that date scheduled with your LAI technician," Rebecca recommends. "It's useful to get a hold of one way in advance. They're a rare commodity."

