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Celebrating Dairy in Extraordinary Times

(June 9, 2020) Dairy farming is a big deal in New York. It is king of the state's agricultural industry, valued at \$2.5 billion annually. To celebrate dairy's health benefits, June Dairy Month has been traditionally commemorated with parades, giant ice cream sundaes and friendly bovines from Buffalo to the Hudson Valley since 1937. But in June 2020, the health of New York's nearly 4,000 dairy producers has stolen the spotlight. In good times and bad, what impacts local dairy farmers impacts a net of businesses and public services in rural communities. It is a classic example of the multiplier effect. Most likely you will not see a sign the likes of the McDonald's golden arches identifying dairy's presence in small towns and villages, but the financial well-being of these farms is critical in terms of jobs, property tax revenue, and more in these vulnerable areas.

Trickle Down

"When I think about the economics of dairy farming," said Jason Burroughs of Aurora Ridge Dairy, "I think about the trickle-down effect. We pay our 35 employees and they make purchases at local stores. The farm purchases inputs at a variety of businesses, including equipment dealerships and others. They benefit in turn. We pay property taxes which support schools, the local highway department and other public services. Our impact is felt far and wide, yet people don't think about it."

Located in Aurora, NY, Aurora Ridge Dairy got its start in the late 1980s. Jason and two partners joined founder Bill Cook to grow the business from 65 cows to 2,350 today. "Joining this business allowed me a certain quality of life," explained Jason, who grew up on a 150-cow dairy in Homer, NY. "Not everyone can make it work by going home, and I had an appetite to do more. At Aurora Ridge I could grow my personal equity and explore opportunities that I couldn't do otherwise. We can provide health insurance and other benefits for owners and employees because we can spread the cost over more cows. It's been exciting to be part of a growing operation."

As the crop manager at Aurora Ridge, Jason oversees over 5,200 acres planted to corn, alfalfa, wheat, barley, and soybeans. This father of five has also taken on volunteer roles with Partners for Healthy Watersheds. "Where we can, we try to engage in community activities," said Jason. "As a result, I've had a lot of speaking opportunities to talk about the farm, what we're doing well, and the regulations we follow. We can always do more. Because we're responsible for such a visible chunk of landscape, we take it all very much to heart."

Cows Pump Dollars into the Community

Porterdale Farms got its start in 1938 when Glenn and Ruth Porter began producing milk and eggs for home delivery in Watertown, NY. On Dry Hill, they raised a big family of six kids. In the decades since, son David and his family have grown the farm into one of the largest dairies in the North Country. They currently milk 2,000 cows and till upwards of 3,800 acres. “Expansion is the only thing I’ve ever known,” said Greg Porter, leader of the family’s third generation. “According to family history, Grandma Ruth wanted to add another chicken coop to the farm long before installing running water in the house!”

Fort Drum and the Watertown Correctional Facility have had a major impact on the growth of the Porter’s home community. “It’s been cool to think we’ve been here all this time,” added Greg, “but our neighbors aren’t the neighbors that I grew up with. And with that transition, there’s come a loss of understanding and appreciation for farming. Consumers do benefit from agriculture. The amount of green space we have is huge. As farmland values have increased, all landowners have benefited. The equipment dealers, auto parts, even Cooperative Extension, would have a much different face without dairy or local agriculture. Our farm alone supports at least 50 local businesses. The investment, the science and technology on the farm, even our labor needs are not something that our local officials are well versed on. We never saw a need to educate the public before, but now we do.”

Greg’s wife Lisa has taken the message on the road, speaking to local business groups and others to build the case for the 168 dairy farms still located in Jefferson County. “Although the masses eat food every day, many don’t understand much about the content, production, processing and marketing of it,” said Lisa. “Their food experience begins and ends with Walmart, Wegman’s, Tops or Price Chopper. If you look at the sheer number of cows in Jefferson County – 29,000 - \$13,000 per cow is pumped back into the local economy. That adds up to over \$377 million annually. Until you put those big numbers out there, people don’t have any idea of dairy farming’s impact.”

SubHead: Nothing Stands Still

Tayl-Wind Farm is situated on 550-acres of flat land, 15 miles south of Utica. Glenn Taylor is a third-generation farmer who came to Cassville at 18 with his grandfather and father from central Massachusetts. “Dad was methodical in selecting the right place to relocate our family farm,” said Glenn. “He shopped all over New York with specific criterion in mind including good soils, good schools, and businesses to support our dairy and family. In Massachusetts our fields were small and rocky. He was committed to farming in a different place, without the urban sprawl, and lack of core businesses dedicated to serving his needs for supplies, financing, and more.”

Fast-forward nearly 40-years, and Glenn is still dairy farming with his wife Sheryl. New technology has led to dramatic changes on the farm. The most notable are the robots milking his 240 cows daily. “This has allowed us to reduce labor and be more precise as herd managers,” said Glenn. “With new, specialized equipment we are more efficient and sanitary.”

According to Glenn, nearly one-third of his farm neighbors are no longer in agriculture. The good news is the landscape still looks largely the same even though new people have moved into the area. Given the value of the land, fields have been purchased by other ag producers in the region and not sprouting new homes. “Agriculture here is evolving,” said Glenn. “Dairying is still a significant economic contributor despite numbers being smaller. The face of the industry moving forward will be different yet.”

SubHead: Farming During a Pandemic

When the pandemic hit this spring, Jason Burrough's wife was delivering their fifth child. "We've had challenges at home and on the farm for sure," said Jason. "She was definitely nervous about giving birth in the hospital and potentially being exposed to the virus. On the farm, we were trying to be proactive with our employees, making sure we had facemasks, hand sanitizer and a safe house where, if needed, we could quarantine staff. To make sure we were doing things right, we had the health department come in and talk about the seriousness of the crisis and the importance of taking precautions to protect both employees and the quality of our milk."

Dairy prices in 2020 were supposed to rebound after a four-year down cycle. The forecast for the balance of the year is unclear. Complications from COVID-19 have played havoc with the market and led to supply chain disruptions early this spring. "Despite the pandemic, our focus has never changed for the core of our business," added Jason. "Things will be different moving forward. I've never done so many Zoom calls in my life, but it's not a bad way to communicate when we need information, or someone needs something of us. There's been some good things, and some bad. It just forces us to tighten things up."

"For dairy in particular, we're between a rock and a hard place," added Greg Porter. "Our federal government establishes the price for our product. We sell wholesale to a retail market, and we're becoming more and more regulated. There may come a time as a nation when we have to decide whether to import food or import labor. With the recent pandemic, we've seen how vulnerable our food chain is and it's becoming a matter of national security."

"This article was brought to you by the New York Animal Agriculture Coalition (NYAAC). NYAAC is a farmer founded and funded not-for-profit organization that strives to enhance the public's understanding of and appreciation for animal agriculture and modern farm practices. NYAAC is effective in doing so by engaging the public in conversations about animal agriculture and empowering farmers to tell their story firsthand."