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Celebrating Dairy in Extraordinary Times

(June 15, 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. 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.

Intertwined with the Community

On the heels of WWII, "Ned" Hanehan founded the business known today as Hanehan Family Dairy in Saratoga Springs. According to family stories, Ned's father thought he was crazy for erecting a 16' x 40' upright silo, convinced it would remain unfilled. Eight decades later the silo is long gone, but this Dairy of Distinction farm is still operating. In 2006, the Hanehans purchased a satellite location 140 miles west in Mount Upton, NY. They chose this farm, because it was the right size to accommodate the energy and enthusiasm of generation three, while being close enough to Saratoga to share key equipment and management.

Having two operations in two locales, gives the Hanehans unique perspective on their collective impact. "Saratoga prides itself on being the city in the country," said Megan Hanehan Borlang. "Farms are quietly doing their thing to keep landscapes green. Without farming, that goes away. Dairying also strengthens business. Hanehan Family Dairy has 100 different vendors in the books. We provide a certain sales volume for ag specific businesses as well as small 'mom and pops.' We are very intertwined with a healthy local economy.

"In Mt. Upton dairy farming is even more central to the economy," added Megan. "We have access to a significant land base and a more accepting community to the noise and sometimes smell of the farm. That community is less removed from the rural way of life, labor is easier to source, and we can grow the business. We're trying to reap the benefits of adding a second operation to support eight partners, plus our employees. We couldn't continue otherwise."

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Shouldering the Burden

Working with his parents and two brothers, Nathan Chittenden operates Dutch Hollow Farms in Schodack Landing, NY, 20 minutes south of Albany. Dutch Hollow Farms has evolved from supporting a single family - the Chittendens - to upwards of 13 families as the farm has grown to 800 cows and needed more non-family labor. "I'm just glad they're not all my kids when they get off the school bus," said Nathan. "It's a lot of responsibility. When we hired our first non-family employees, I thought they'd all be young, single people. Now some of their children are living and working on the farm. It's a real source of pride."

To produce enough feed for their cattle, Dutch Hollow cultivates 2,000 acres of crop land. "I don't pay much attention to the numbers," added Nathan. "We have the land so we can do our job. We pay taxes in three towns, and two school districts. Dairies and fruit farms in the area are probably the largest taxpayers. I had one apple farmer tell me that although he's been paying his fair share for years, he's never sent an apple tree to school. We all need the public services, and school districts need the support. Residents, including those here only on the weekends, would have to shoulder a larger burden without us."

Farming During a Pandemic

Complications from COVID-19 played havoc with the market and led to supply chain disruptions early this spring. The Chittendens were shipping milk seven days a week to a New York City based cheesemaker before the pandemic struck. When the operation closed suddenly over concern for their employees, the Chittenden's milk cooperative pivoted quickly to find a home for their milk. As a perishable product, milk cannot be stored for long periods of time to moderate supply. In fact, 50% of production is processed in as little as 24 hours. According to Nathan, other local processors in Massachusetts have continued to operate, helping the supply chain recover while the national dairy market improves. "We had a number of private messages and Facebook posts from people who wanted to support us locally, which was encouraging," said Nathan.

"We're not sure how things will turn around in this current environment," said Megan Hanehan Borlang. "A lot of what goes on in the market is completely out of our control. The hardest part is the income side of the ledger when prices are fixed at the national level. At the end of the day, we must be profitable."

An unforeseen consequence of the pandemic has been the rise in consumer awareness of food availability, quality, and cost. "The general public has a new sensitivity to knowing where their food comes from," added Megan. "The food chain is so lean. It's not built for this kind of adversity. We're collectively having a real moment. It's vital for producers to reach out on all public platforms now to tell our story." In addition to the Hanehan's dairy operation, they operate two small farm stands for eight weeks during the fall. "Our stands provide a great forum for conversations with consumers," continued Megan. "It sheds light on our way of life. Buying local also keeps money in the community."

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Still More Opportunities

Dutch Hollow Farms is a 100% Jersey herd and is uniquely positioned to capitalize on niche processing opportunities, especially cheese. Jerseys are highly productive, smaller dairy animals that produce milk with a high butterfat and protein content. Having a unique product, close to major markets is a boon for the family farm. “We’re fortunate in New York that we have a powerhouse milk industry; fourth in the nation,” said Nathan Chittenden. “Milk doesn’t have to travel far to be processed. I think our milk travels less than 100 miles. If we’ve learned something from this pandemic and the impact it’s had on the supply chain, no one’s doing a bad job, we just need more processing capability. Buying local shouldn’t be just a niche opportunity, but available to everybody at an equitable price between producers and consumers. As producers, our ability to recover will depend on location, redundancy and processing capability.”

“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.”