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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. 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.

#### **SubHead: Dairy & Apples are King in Peru**

Cropping on 8,000 acres and milking 4,500 cows, Adirondack Farms of Peru, NY employs 80 workers year-round. The business is one of the largest, full-time agricultural employers in the area. "We have an economic impact," said Jon. "Few people would realize it, but without agriculture in our community, small businesses and even chain stores could close. We're supporting employee families, making direct purchases for goods and services ourselves and ensuring a steady stream of foot traffic of \$5 to \$50 each time in the local hardware, dollar store, grocery, and others. This is apple country too, and these businesses rely on our seasonal help. Harvest time is one of their busiest times of the year."

The Rulfs family landed in Peru, NY in 1952. With no previous farm experience and fresh out of Farmingdale University, Bob Rulfs launched his dream farm with four milk cows, three heifer calves and 12 acres of apple trees. In 1988, Bob's eldest son Jon purchased the dairy so Bob could devote more time to the orchard and roadside stand. Today the family's second and third generations have brought back the apple and dairy enterprises under one roof and added a restaurant and brewery to the mix.

"Until recently I kept a really low profile about the connection between the various businesses," said Jon. "Having a large dairy, I didn't want the others to suffer if the public had a bad impression of the farm. Being a good neighbor is first and foremost on my mind, so we do our best to limit traffic and keep mud off the roads. But this is the simple stuff. We also continue to invest in new technology at a large dollar investment to manage manure which reduces odor and creates energy that we can put back onto the power grid. We also use a drag line system where manure is directly incorporated into soils. In 2021 we will be generating natural gas.

Image is important to us. And it's my way to show that I care about the community. Now I have both the Rulfs Orchard and Adirondack Farms' logos on my truck."

### **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: Farming During a Pandemic**

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 played havoc with the market and led to supply chain disruptions early this spring.

"At the end of the day," said Jon Rulfs, "I'll be curious if agriculture plays a major role in our national economic recovery from the pandemic. Historically, agriculture has been the backbone of our country during tough times. It's really unfortunate that sporadic food shortages have been frightening for all of us. But hopefully there is new appreciation for what's on grocery shelves. For me, I may not be a great or even a good leader, but I will lead by example. If I'm doubling down and being positive, people will see that and be more optimistic moving forward. I'm focusing my attention on when things will turn-around. The market is already changing."

“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.”*

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