

Third generation takes over family dairy

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

Nathan Gilbert's grandparents moved near Othello, Wash., in the early 1960s from Roosevelt, Utah, when the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project began.

"Our dairy and milk plant is at Warden and the main farm — where we live — is near Othello, about 20 minutes down the road from the dairy," he said.

"My grandfather and his brother raised potatoes, beans and corn. My uncle came back into the family business in the early 1970s and my father in the late 1970s. They decided to expand and in 1981 a small dairy came up for sale nearby," he said.

Those 300 cows were the start.

"About 6 months after we purchased the dairy there was an opportunity to lease a milk-processing plant just around the corner, so we began bottling milk as well," Gilbert said.

"At that time we were selling milk to Darigold. As we grew, we leased several other dairy facilities, and in 1995 purchased the dairy we're operating today."

Then in 2002 their milk processing plant burned.

"We shipped milk to Montana, to Meadow Gold, while we started construction on the plant we're in today in Warden. In 2004 we started processing again," Gilbert said. "We are still adding animals, and by this time next year we hope to be milking about 2,500."

The cows are all Hol-

Country Morning Farms Dairy

Owners: Gilbert family

Farming: Since 1958. Country Morning Farms Dairy established 1981 near Warden, Wash.

Milking: 2,100 cows

steins, and the Gilberts raise their own heifers in a heifer-developing facility at the dairy.

"It's a self-contained unit, and a closed herd. We normally produce more heifers than we need, and sell about 20 percent, along with all the bull calves," he said.

"We breed them, calve them out, sell them as fresh cows and keep the heifer calves. Currently, we are



Courtesy of Country Morning Dairy

Nathan, left, and Kevin Gilbert are seen in the milking parlor of Country Morning Farms Dairy near Othello, Wash.

not selling any, because we are growing the herd," he said.

Once they reach the 2,500 mark they will probably sell about 50 fresh cows per month.

They raise about 80 percent of their forage — hay, corn silage and earlage.

"We farm about 2,000 acres. When feed prices are high, this makes our feed cheaper. When prices are low we could probably purchase feed cheaper than we can raise it, but it's nice to not have to haul it in."

The herd has an 85-pound

daily average milk production per cow.

"Milk from our plant goes to grocery stores and to customers who manufacture milk products, including a cheese plant. We haul milk locally and to Seattle and Portland," he said.

Nathan and his brother, Kevin, came back to the dairy after wearing different hats.

"Keven came back in the fall of 2013 and I came back in the spring of 2014. Our other brother, Jason, is planning to come back in 2017. We are the third generation

in the dairy. The fourth generation is still very young; my oldest son is 7."

Nathan and his brothers left the farm for college.

"We all went to college, got our degrees and went into the work force. Kevin was a CPA and did accounting. I was a banker for Northwest Farm Credit in Twin Falls, Idaho, for five years," Nathan said. "Jason is an astrophysicist and does research for the University of Michigan. We started talking and thinking about the family business and decided it would be fun to come back and grow it."

But he said family is also a big part of the picture.

"It's nice to get the family back together so the cousins can be together," he said. "A farm is a great place for kids to grow up."

There are now 13 cousins living on the farm, he said.

"We went out into the world, learned something different and hopefully bring back new knowledge and skills," he said.

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