

Farmers get a hand from robotic parlor

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

Vale is about as far from the misty pastures of the Oregon Coast as a town can get. Just 12 miles from the Idaho border, Vale, Ore., is in the midst of the high desert: big blue skies, an open landscape and a dry climate.

Yet here Dairylain Farms milks a herd of about 450 registered Jerseys, all born and raised on the farm, with an additional 500 head of young stock waiting in the wings.

This family-owned farm was founded in 1971 by Warren and Lori Chamberlain. Today, Warren and Lori still play a major role in the dairy operation, but they're joined by their son Jason Chamberlain and his wife, Mary Chamberlain.

Well-known for their docile, sociable, curious nature and tolerance of hot weather, Jerseys are a natural fit for a family farm in one of the hottest parts of the state.

"They're so curious,"



Courtesy of Dairylain Farms

Jason and Mary Chamberlain are the second generation of dairy farmers at Dairylain Farms near Vale, Ore.

Jason said. "They don't run away from you; they run toward you."

"Kids love them," his wife, Mary, adds. "I have a three-year-old who showed one at the fair, and it just followed them around."

Jerseys are generally smaller than Holsteins, and though they produce more

milk per pound of body weight than Holsteins, their overall production tends to be a bit lower.

Jersey milk is high in butterfat, however, leading the Chamberlains to target the cheese rather than fluid market for their output. All of their milk is sold to the Sorrento Lactalis mozzarel-

la plant in Nampa, Idaho, which is run by a French company that produces cheese for the U.S. and European markets.

In addition to pasture, the Chamberlains farm 500 acres for fodder. There, they raise about 80 percent of their feed to hedge against fluctuations in commodity

prices and give them better control over their herd nutrition.

This year, Dairylain Farms is transitioning from its 1960s double six herringbone parlor to a fully robotic milking system. The Chamberlains had struggled to find qualified personnel in their sparsely populated area, and concerns about climbing minimum wage rates and new employee benefit programs led them to look into automation.

"Last summer we went to Iowa and took a tour to watch some robots. We decided not to at first, but after hearing what the legislators were talking about with minimum wage, 401ks and sick leave, we went back and started looking at what it would cost us to have employees," Warren said. "So

then we looked at robots again, and that's where we went. We'll be able to milk more cows and have fewer employees than we have now."

Installation of the new robotic parlor took about a year, and the Chamberlains hope to be using the new system in June.

"I think mechanization and robotics are going to continue to increase," Mary said, "And Oregon has been really supportive of that move. It combines the industrial and agricultural sides of Oregon, and it's a good alternative for family farms who don't want to sell out."

"I think the future looks pretty good for dairies, really," Warren said. "You can't beat ag for raising kids and families. It teaches them a lot."

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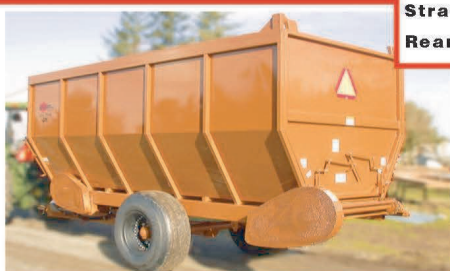
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