

On this farm, it's all about working together

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

"Many hands make light work."

It's a truism because it's, well, true. And there are few businesses where it holds truer than dairy farming.

The daily demands of a dairy farm — managing herd health, coordinating shipments, planting pasture, moving fences, delivering calves, running the milking parlor — can be overwhelming.

That's why Tim Kuenzi and Marinus Noordam teamed up to run AJ Dairy, a mid-sized dairy farm near Mount Angel, Ore.

The business partners have come to rely on one another for managing all the jobs that keep a dairy running.

"If there was only one of us, when we're making silage the cows would be neglected," said Kuenzi. "If there was a calf to be pulled, there would be a crop that wasn't taken care of."

Kuenzi and Noordam had previously worked as herdsmen for the dairy's for-

mer owner. When the owner turned 70, he offered them the opportunity to purchase the herd. They leaped at the chance.

Today, they're milking about 1,000 purebred Holsteins and double-cropping annual ryegrass and corn for silage on their main property near Mount Angel.

In 2012, AJ Dairy was starting to feel growing pains. The herd was beginning to outgrow its space in the Willamette Valley, and they were growing dissatisfied with their supplier of replacement heifers. So they expanded, purchasing an additional parcel in Central Oregon to bring breeding fully in-house and expand their forage program to include alfalfa and triticale.

With the two locations, they're able to produce most of their forage themselves, giving them better control over input pricing and the health of their herd.

"In the last few years, we've gained 10 pounds (of milk) per animal for the improvements we made: more

space, genetic improvements, good forage and better quality feed," Noordam explained.

AJ Dairy sells all of its milk to Farmers Cooperative Creamery, better known by the initials FCC, most of which ends up in the fluid market.

As they've grown, finding good labor has become a more significant consideration.

"We're OK on labor right now, but I think it's going to get harder to find good, skilled people," Noordam said. "Younger generations are farther from the farm, and non-farm kids don't usually think about a career in agriculture, or don't come to the farm to ask for a job in high school."

That growing disconnect from farming has been a major driver for consumer preferences for third-party sustainability and animal welfare certifications, Noordam said. "People who are far removed want that assurance from their retailer. For us it's a little bit more documentation, but it's not a big deal because we're in compliance anyway. But

we have to try to relate to them and be able to tell our story."

"We have a lot to be thankful for," Kuenzi said. "There

have been some tough times, but in general it's been really good. We both have the attitude that challenges are there, but we need to be thankful

and work hard and do a good job. If you have a positive attitude and a willingness to work with people, a lot of challenges disappear."

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Courtesy of AJ Dairy

Holsteins pose for the camera at AJ Dairy. "If we don't please our animals optimally, we won't get optimum production," says Marinus Noordam, who partnered with Tim Kuenzi to run AJ Dairy.