

People & Places

IN DEFENSE OF DAIRIES

Larry Stap speaks up for the industry, advocates more transparency

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

LYNDEN, Wash. — Larry Stap has advice for fellow dairy farmers.

“We probably can be a little more transparent in how we handle our nutrients,” he says. “If we’re doing a good job, what do we have to hide?”

By “nutrients,” Stap, of course, refers to manure, a substance of substantial interest in Washington state.

The Lummi Nation’s polluted shellfish beds in Portage Bay are downriver from a cluster of Whatcom County dairies, including Stap’s.

The shellfish beds were contaminated in the 1990s, but the bacteria levels dropped after the state and county adopted manure-handling rules.

Over the past few years, however, unhealthy bacteria levels have returned. Dairies are fretting about being singled out and sued, even though cities, wildlife, septic tanks, other farms, rural development and economic activities upstream in Canada are among other potential pollution sources.

No easy answer

“If there was an easy answer to why (pollution) levels are increasing in Portage Bay, we would have identified it and fixed it,” said Andrea Hood, the state’s coordinator of the Whatcom Clean Water Program. “The strategy is to look at all the sources and address all the sources and concentrate on where we have opportunities for improvement.”

Meanwhile, the Washington Department of Ecology took the position last year that standard manure lagoons leak. From this proposition flows regulatory possibilities.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Whatcom County, Wash., dairy farmer Larry Stap talks about the 1.4 million-gallon manure storage tank June 14 at his farm near the Canadian border. Stap hosted a tour for the state House Agriculture Committee.

On top of this came What’s Upstream, the Environmental Protection Agency-funded lobbying campaign by the Swinomish Indian tribe and several environmental groups for mandatory 100-foot buffers along rivers and streams.

Photos of dairy cows standing in creeks figured prominently in the campaign’s imagery, even though the pictures weren’t taken in Washington.

Finger-pointing

In response, a farmer advocacy group, Save Family Farming, was formed to counter the allegations that farmers are unregulated polluters. Stap serves as the group’s president.

He jokes about being railroaded into the position, but also says finger-pointing at dairies “kind of got my blood boiling.”

Whatcom County has fewer dairies and fewer cows and handles manure better than in the 1990s, he said.

“How can a diminishing factor be increasing the problem?” Stap asked. “It didn’t add up to me at all.”

He said that over the years he has become more of an in-

dustry advocate. “Not many others were very involved in telling our story,” he said.

“I also have a brand to defend,” he said.

Stap, 62, owns Twin Brook Creamery with his wife, Debbie, and their son-in-law and daughter, Mark and Michelle Tolsma.

His Dutch immigrant great-grandparents Jacob and Tryntje Stap cleared the land near the Canadian border in 1910.

Until about a decade ago, Stap belonged to the Darigold cooperative. The farm has about 180 mature cows. Rather than try to expand the herd, the family decided to add value to what they produced.

Twin Brook Creamery looked for stores to sell slow-pasteurized, non-homogenized Jersey milk in glass bottles.

‘Uphill battle’

“It was an uphill battle, to be honest with you,” Stap said.

One grocery store chain picked up Twin Brook milk, though, and the phone started ringing. The milk is sold in Western Washington and Portland. Stap said he spends

about an hour a day answering emails from customers.

“You get direct consumer interaction, which is absolutely rewarding,” Stap said.

Embracing his advice on transparency, Stap hosts farm tours and speaks in videos to showcase dairy practices.

In a recent Facebook video, Stap talked about his three new robotic-milking machines. Each represents a \$250,000 investment.

Because the machines are always ready, the cows choose when to step up and get milked.

Robotic help

“No human is involved in the decision when they get milked,” Stap says on the video. “It’s been fun to watch our girls develop from a herd mentality to an individual mentality.”

Within days, the video had been viewed on Facebook nearly 100,000 times. More than 100 people left comments.

Many were impressed by the technology and liked the idea of cows controlling their schedules. “OMG! What will they come up with next!! It’s

Western Innovator

Larry Stap
Age: 62:

Business: Owner, Twin Brook Creamery in Lynden, Wash., with wife, Debbie, and their daughter and son-in-law, Michelle and Mark Tolsma.

Positions: President of Save Family Farming; president of North Lynden Watershed Improvement District.

Quote: “I over the years have become more and more of an advocate for our industry as not many others were very involved in telling our story. It now has become even more of a passion.”

really great for the cows!” read a typical comment.

Stap said the comments were unexpected, amazing and welcomed.

Lagoon replaced

Less high-tech but more to the point of controlling manure is the dairy’s 1.4 million-gallon above-ground steel tank, which replaced an earthen lagoon in 2014.

Back then, a mole burrowed a hole in the lagoon. Manure slurry ran out and pooled near the lagoon, about 20 feet from a ditch that runs into Fish Trap Creek. The creek runs into the Nooksack River, which empties into Portage Bay.

“Boy, did that make you nervous,” Stap said. “I didn’t need that kind of liability. What if (a leak) happened in the middle of the night?”

Stap said the tank cost about \$300,000, with two-thirds paid by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“The general public is demanding water quality. This is one way their taxpayer dollars can go to meeting water-quality standards,” Stap said.

Farmers lobbying for the right to fix own tractors

By NICHOLAS BERGIN
Lincoln Journal Star

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Mick Minchow’s tractors are marvels of modern machinery.

They have air conditioning, guidance systems, satellite radio and more sensors than he can shake a corn cob at, all kept running by computer systems and software.

But there’s one thing the Waverly farmer doesn’t have: the right to fix his John Deere 8235 R if it goes on the fritz.

Gone are the days when farmers could be their own mechanics. Just taking a peek under the metaphorical hood of the computers that run the big tractor could put Minchow in violation of the federal Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

It’s the same for digital products from cellphones to printers to concrete crushers that rely on computer programs to run.

Nebraska is one of four states to consider legislation that would require manufacturers to make diagnostic, service and technical information available to farmers and independent repair technicians.

The others are Massachusetts, Minnesota and New York.

While the Nebraska Fair Repair Bill (LB1072) failed to gain traction before senators adjourned this spring, the issue is far from dead. It has been referred to the Agriculture Committee for study over the summer, and advocates are pushing for the bill to be reintroduced during the next session.

Now, the makers of off-road and farm equipment and many consumer electronics require their products to be repaired by certified technicians.

Grinding gears

That means if Minchow’s tractor stops working he has no choice but to call the dealer. He can’t check the system codes himself to decide whether it’s an easy fix like changing a filter or something more complicated. And that grinds the Waverly-area farmer’s gears.

“I want it to be my call. I don’t want to have to make two trips to the service department — one to diagnose it and one to fix it,” said Minchow, who has been farming north of Waverly for more than 40 years.

And as dealerships have closed or consolidated, he said, technicians have gotten farther away and service bills more expensive.

Who owns software?

John Deere, in a 2014 comment to the U.S. Copyright Office, said the people who buy its tractors don’t own the software that makes them run. Instead, each has an “implied license for the life of the vehicle to operate the vehicle.”

In some cases, the company said, software could be subject to third-party restrictions and accessing it could violate copyright, trade secret or contractual rights.

But farmers work when they can, and every hour matters when storms, frost and mud leave them with few suitable days. A malfunctioning combine can bring the fall harvest to a standstill.

Waiting for a dealer to diagnose and fix a problem could mean hours, days or weeks lost.

Proponents of Nebraska’s Fair Repair Bill say it would let farmers work on their own equipment and allow independent mechanics to help get ma-

chines running quicker.

The Nebraska Farm Bureau, the state’s largest agriculture advocacy group, has not taken a stance on the issue but its members are talking about it, said Jordan Dux, the state Farm Bureau’s director of national affairs.

“For the time being, we remain neutral on it but that very well might change as we work through our policy development process,” he said during a recent web forum.

Economy slows

Some Farm Bureau members, Dux said, are concerned about taking business away from dealerships at a time when the ag economy has slowed and few farmers are buying new machinery.

“Keeping those dealerships in their communities is important,” he said. “Repairs are going to be the way a lot of these dealerships are going to make money for the time being simply because folks aren’t buying a lot of new equipment.”

Another concern, Dux said, centers on what farmers should do if they buy equipment and find the previous owner made

changes to the software they don’t like.

Kyle Wiens, a software engineer and leading figure in the national Right to Repair movement, said in the same web seminar that new owners of used equipment would have what they need to restore factory defaults if manufacturers provided diagnostic tools and software.

John Hansen, president of the state’s second largest agricultural advocacy organization, the Nebraska Farmers Union, supports the Right to Repair efforts, saying farmers should have the same option to get their tractor fixed by an independent mechanic as they do when they need to get their truck fixed.

“This is a fairness issue. Folks in agriculture shouldn’t be singled out and treated differently than the automotive customers or truck customers,” Hansen said in the web forum.

“Competition is what makes our system of economics better. When you take competition out of the equation there is almost always a reduction in choice and quality and an increase in cost to the consumer.”

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5:30 p.m. Columbia County Fairgrounds, 58892 Saulser Road, St. Helens, Ore.

Tuesday, July 26
FSPCA Preventive Controls for Human Food Course, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Yanke Family Research Center, 220 E. Parkcenter Blvd., Boise, Idaho. The new FSMA regulation requires every processing facility to have a trained resource person or “Preventive Controls Qualified Individual” who has completed a specialized training course such as the one developed by the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance (FSPCA) that is recognized by the FDA. This person will oversee the implementation of the facility’s food safety plan and other key tasks.

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adults, \$10 ages 6-12 inclusive). Fair parking is free.

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EO Media Group
dba Capital Press

An independent newspaper
published every Friday.

Capital Press (ISSN 0740-3704) is published weekly by EO Media Group, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem OR 97301.

Periodicals postage paid at Portland, OR, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to Capital Press, P.O. Box 2048 Salem, OR 97308-2048.

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P.O. Box 2048
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