

Dairy farmer shares industry's story by engaging its critics

By SUZANNE FRARY
For the Capital Press

CHEHALIS, Wash. — Dairy farmer Michelle Schilter had an encounter with animal-rights activists last March that she said was an eye-opener.

She saw the activists at South by Southwest, a food and technology conference in Austin, Texas.

She introduced herself as a dairy farmer and asked what they hope to accomplish. They wanted to end factory farming.

"I asked them, 'What's your definition of a factory farm?'" she said.

The activists couldn't say. "They wanted to end something, but they couldn't say exactly what that was," she said.

Michelle was at the conference representing Dairy Management Inc., which was there to promote dairy products. She serves on the national organization's board.

She is also chairwoman of the Washington Dairy Products Commission.

The commission and DMI encourage farmers to use social media to tell their stories to reach the "movable middle."

"They're the people who aren't sure if dairy is healthy, or if they should be using almond milk instead," she said.

Michelle said dairy farmers often hesitate to talk to the public. They worry animal-rights groups might target them, she said.

"They think, 'Why do I want to waste my time with an activist on Facebook when I'm dealing with things on my farm?'" she said.

She and her husband, Lonny, are third-generation farmers. They own Sun-Ton Farms, a 180-acre organic dairy near Chehalis, Wash.

The farm has about 220



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Dairy farmer Michelle Schilter gives her calf, Bootleg, a rub April 15 in the barn at Sun-Ton Farms in Chehalis, Wash. Schilter and her husband, Lonny, keep between 450 and 500 red-and-white Holsteins on their 180-acre organic dairy.

milking cows in a 450- to 500-head herd of red-and-white Holsteins.

Lonny grew up on a farm in Auburn, Wash., before his family moved their dairy to Chehalis in the early 1990s. Michelle grew up in California's Napa Valley, studied agriculture in college, but didn't farm until she met Lonny. The couple have three teenagers.

The dairy transitioned to organic in 2006.

"It was the best decision," Michelle said. Prices for organic milk are less volatile than for conventional milk, she said.

The farm belongs to the Darigold co-op, and its milk is sold through Horizon.

Michelle raises the farm's calves, some of which move next door to the dairy owned by Lonny's parents. Her 3-year-old calf barn is self-flushing and has automatic curtains that adjust for

ventilation.

A few weeks after the conference in Texas, a windstorm ripped off the commodity barn's roof and rain ruined the feed and bedding stored inside.

The dairy's nutritionist temporarily adjusted the cows' diet to include more alfalfa and less grain. Keeping cows healthy is the first priority on an organic dairy, said Michelle.

"We have so few options for treating illness," she said. "If a cow needs antibiotics, we give it, but the cow has to leave the herd."

People are curious about dairy farms, she said.

Michelle said people want to know if she treats her animals humanely. They want to know if she names her cows, and if the dairy produces a "clean product," she said. "I do all of that, everything they say they want."



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