

Regs, labor shortage cast shadow on dairies

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

Humboldt County, Calif., dairyman John Vevada said the best part of his day does not involve being in the pasture with the cows.

"My wife, Kris, insists that all the family has breakfast together before we start the day," he said. "After my two sons graduated from college both of them came back to work on the farm. So the four of us sit down and talk about the day's calendar and plans for the future. I am very fortunate for this time."

He said he really doesn't have any bad days.

Vevada was born in Humboldt County in Northern California and hasn't left except for college, where he majored in animal husbandry. He has spent 45 years in the dairy industry.

"We milk 600 organic Holstein cows for a couple of reasons," he said. "I get better strength and more genetics with Holsteins than with any other breed."

In the beginning he bought 50 cross-breed cows and started a few registered Holsteins.

"I was able to establish

a herd that built a stronger dairy," he said.

The farm as been certified organic since 2006. At the time they were converting, the farm was milking over 1,000 cows and he was working long days. Vevada acknowledges that the schedule was "killing him."

Today his average day is 10-12 hours a day with nine employees to help.

Vevada pastures the cows on 800 acres. The weather is perfect for the cows, he said. The ocean fog keeps the farm cool compared to the scorching temperatures inland. The lush pasture is the farm's only

crop. He sells the milk to Clover Dairy in Sonoma.

Vevada points out that there are plenty of challenges.

"Labor is number one," he said. "Until somebody decides to have immigration reform we will have a difficult time finding employees."

"Number two is regulations that involve everything: water and air quality, regulating our springs with water resources and ground water," he said. "A year ago we took them

for granted. Now we have to hire consultants to review the paperwork and that becomes very cumbersome — and the regs are getting worse."

Labor and regulations are the primary reason many farmers are leaving the industry.

Vevada also said the industry is competitive and unless a farm is large it can't compete. There are 1,300-1,400 dairies in California with an average herd size of 1,200.

"Those new to the industry

don't know what they are in for," he said. "So much capital is needed just to get started. There are easier ways to make a living."

Most states welcome dairy farms, but California is different, he said.

"...California regulations are so tight and overhead is so high a farmer needs more cows to spread the costs," he said. "California leads the nation in dairy production, but I don't know for how long."



Courtesy of the Vevada Family

The Vevada dairy family. In the back row are John and Kris. In the front are Ronald, left, and Robert. They milk 600 certified organic Holstein cows in Humboldt County in Northern California.

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