

# Platt's Oak Hill Dairies grow, diversify

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**  
For the Capital Press

Jack Platt's dream was always to own a dairy, something that's difficult to do in Southern California, where he was raised.

Now he owns two.

He married Marilyn in 1975 and within a few years moved to Corvallis, Ore., and started a dairy on 25 acres with 150 first-calf heifers.

Nine years later, in 1987, they moved to Independence, Ore., where they bought 100 acres and milked 350 cows.

Today Platt's Oak Hill Dairy milks 1,600 cows three times a day and raises its own replacement heifers.

"There are just so many variables in the price of milk

and the cost of feed that we have virtually no control," Jack said. "That's why we grow as much of our own feed as possible to help control our production costs."

In 2004, the Platts took a deeper plunge and started an organic dairy in nearby Turner, Ore. Organic was growing fast and it seemed a good time to diversify.

Managed by Tim Baker, the Turner dairy milks 1,000 cows three times a day and farms 2,400 acres in Turner and at its heifer facility in Klamath Falls.

Baker gets nervous when rain persists, delaying planting and the day the cows can be let into pasture. The USDA requires organic cows get at least 30 percent of their dry



Photos by Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

Tim Baker checks in with calves at the organic side of Platt's Oak Hill Dairies, which he manages. The 1,000-cow Turner, Ore., operation raises calves to 6 months before transferring them to its organic heifer ranch in Klamath Falls, Ore.

intake from pasture grazing at least 120 days a year.

They've also had to find alternatives to traditional medicines including garlic oil for

infections and diatomaceous earth for worming and doing away with lice.

"These cows are athletes," Baker said. "In the summer

time the cows will walk two to four miles a day going in and out of pasture and have lots of muscle. They are probably healthier than I am."

In addition to the inspections required for conventional dairies, organic dairies are subject to an exhaustive year-long certification.

"The audit can take two to three days and involves everything from the seeds to the feed to what we use to wash the milking parlor walls — all of that must be approved before we can use it," Baker said.

A big part of their success lies in their employees, Marilyn Platt said, and while managing people is one of the most difficult parts of dairy farming, some of their employees have been with them more than 25 years.

"Communication is necessary to keep employees happy and motivated and need to know they're appreciated," Marilyn said. "They take pride in their work and we try to treat them how we would want to be treated."

Nevertheless, as in most areas of farming, labor issues have dairy farmers seeking more automation in the milking process.



Baker, general manager of the organic side of Platt's Oak Hill Dairies, in the milking parlor. Everything from the crops that are planted to what substance is used to wash the milking parlor walls must be approved before use.

"Things have changed so much; we used to be happy with 50 pounds average per cow and now we expect 90 pounds," Jack said. "With all the changes in genetics, nutrition and overall design of facilities, I don't expect it to stop there.

"It has its ups and downs, but we are proud to be part of the dairy industry," Jack said. "Milk is still the purest of foods, whether organic or not."

Field trips are helpful in giving the public a taste of how their milk is produced.

"We've always tried to run an honest, ethical business and we feel we've been blessed because of that," Marilyn said. "The best part of dairy-ing is being able to spend quality time with our family, watching our four girls grow up and seeing our grandchildren enjoy life on the farm."

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