

Family-run dairy grows to meet demands of industry

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

Riverbend Dairy is a large family operation near Wendell, Idaho. Arie Roeloffs, his father-in-law and brother-in-law built the dairy in 1992 in partnership, but recently split, and Roeloffs changed the name to Riverbend Dairy.

"We currently milk about 5,200 Holsteins," he said. Milk is sold to Glanbia Foods, a cheese company.

"We raise our own heifers and rarely sell any, since we are increasing our own herd. Keeping heifers allows us to cull heavier and improve the genetics of our herd," he said.

Sexed semen is utilized to produce heifer calves. Any male calves are sold to a calf ranch after they've had their colostrum and are off to a good start.

"This is an open lot dairy and we grow most of our own corn silage and haylage," said Roeloffs. "We farm about 3,000 acres."

This was one of the first large dairies in Idaho, but now there are many.

"The dairy industry has changed," he said. "Not that there are more cows in Idaho, but many of the smaller dairies are selling out to larger ones."

There's a reason for fewer small family dairies, he said.

"The younger generation isn't going into dairying. When the mother and father milked 100 to 200 cows, there was so much work involved that their children never saw the benefit of all that work and were not interested in continuing the legacy of dairying," he said.

"When the parents got old and tired of working so hard, the kids had good jobs in town and didn't want to come back and dairy, to make \$30,000 a year when they could make



Heather Smith Thomas/For the Capital Press
Arie Roeloffs, right, owner of Riverbend Dairy, and son-in-law Jordan Jarvis at their 5,200-head operation near Wendell, Idaho.

\$50,000 a year in town," he said. "The smaller farms were labor-intense. When herds are bigger you can have a few more employees and a little more freedom."

Larger dairies have some advantages and efficiencies over the small ones, he said.

Land prices have also discouraged young people.

"Land that sold for \$900 to \$1,000 an acre 20 years ago is \$6,000 to \$8,000 an acre today, so it's hard to start a dairy or expand," Roeloffs said.

"Dairymen need to adapt and keep up with the times to survive, which means more production. Twenty-five years ago, 50 pounds of milk per day per cow was adequate and 60 pounds meant you were at the top. Today, you'll go broke if your cows are only producing 60 pounds of milk. It takes 80 pounds now to make it work," he said.

You must have good cows, and take good care of them, he said.

"Cow comfort is a big issue; you must have optimum conditions for optimum milk," he said. "People say that this kind of production means a factory farm. But we're not a factory farm. Even though we

milk 5,200 cows we are still family-owned and -involved."

A son-in-law, Jordan Jarvis, runs the dairy as manager and partner.

"My other son-in-law works with me, too. My son is currently in college and works on another dairy. He may eventually come back here to work with us, but I want him to get some good experience on another dairy," said Roeloffs. His daughter Kristin works with the United Dairy-men of Idaho.

Roeloffs has four grandchildren.

"My daughter Julianna Jarvis has four young children (ages 5, 4, 2 and 4 months old) and they are already very interested in the farm. One of them already knows every tractor we have!" he said.

"Even with a good family business, we must constantly innovate and remodel; we are continually fixing things up and improving — doing whatever it takes to make it more comfortable for the cows," he said.

He is on the Idaho Dairy-men's Association board and on the National Dairy Board promoting the dairy industry.

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