

# River Bend Jerseys suited to Coos County

By **GAIL OBERST**  
For the Capital Press

When Pete Mahaffy, 42, talks about his organic dairy, he starts with the big picture.

In the 1920s, Coos County had the highest number of dairies in the state. Granted, they were small. Wide swaths of open acreage were rare then, so many farms were remote and isolated, and were served by milk boats that came and went with the tides.

There were once 25 dairies on his branch of the river alone — Pete and Kelly's River Bend Jerseys are at the confluence of the Millicoma and the South Fork Coos rivers on a gravel road nearly 10 miles from town.

Over the years, as dairy prices rose and fell, skimming profits from small operations, dairies either expanded or, like his father in 1994, decided to

raise beef cattle instead. The farm Pete's grandfather bought in 1927 no longer had dairy cows.

But that wasn't the end. Pete went away to Oregon State University, met his wife-to-be, and took a job with Jon Bansen, an innovative Monmouth-area organic dairy farmer. With Jon, Pete learned how to manage pastures by rotating dairy cows from field to field, allowing grass to grow, protecting the ground and reducing the need for feed, chemicals and medicines by keeping the animals on grass longer.

During his tenure at the Bansen farm, Pete began to see that his Coos River home, with its mild, wet climate and loamy river soil was even better for this kind of rotational grazing here where the winter floods often cover swaths of the Mahaffy land.

After four years with Ban-



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Pete and Kelly Mahaffy own River Bend Jerseys, an organic dairy near Coos Bay, Ore.

sen, he brought his skills, and Kelly, home to Coos County.

It was the right time and the right place, Pete said. Already, a few dairy farmers in Coos County were turning to organic practices, creating a network that attracted Organic Valley,

Pete said. Today, all of the dairies in Coos County, with the exception of one, sell to Organic Valley.

The organic market was proving to be predictable, suited to smaller acreages, less expensive to maintain, and

perfect for Coos County conditions, Pete said.

Pete and Kelly in 2003 bought a small herd from the Bansens and started milking 60 Jerseys on the land where he grew up. Today, every 30 days, they rotationally graze their herd of 150 around 200 acres along the rivers. They started milking in their grandfather's 1930s flat barn. In 2007, they built a modern multi-level milking parlor.

Why Jerseys, a smaller cow than the heftier Holsteins? They're better suited to his place, Pete says. Lighter animals, less mud, less expense.

"Jerseys are ideal for the southern Oregon coast," Pete said.

"I'm mostly a grass farmer," he said. "I'm managing the grass so I'm not taking up more than I'm putting down."

In addition to manure, some of the Mahaffy land gets an

organic dose of fish waste — shrimp and crab waste from the processing plant in Charleston. Pete talked at length about what he called "the game," the mathematical balancing act that keeps his cows on the freshest grass possible.

Recent improvements have included new lanes that protect the soil from hoof damage — gravel and permeable geotextile-covered ground combined are sturdier than gravel alone. Other additions to the farm have included the Mahaffys' three daughters — the oldest is 12.

When asked about future plans, the Mahaffys look at each other and shrug. They may grow radishes to improve the milk and reduce the grain bill, Pete said.

"We can't compete on quantity, so we're always looking for a way to improve the quality," he said.

## ERNST IRRIGATION



Proud to be your distributor of  
**US Screen Co.**  
PROUDLY MADE IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND

**OEM Replacements  
Screens for Screw  
Press Separators**

- Superior Quality
- Competitive Pricing
- Efficient Separation



**Custom screen  
reinforcement  
available upon request**

**Available for all major  
separator brands**

For more info contact  
**Corey Dorst**  
**503-467-7018**

**www.ErnstIrrigation.com • 503.633.1111**  
**20179 Main St. • St. Paul, OR 97137**

D18-3/100



## STORAGE CONTAINERS FOR SALE!



### EQUIPMENT TYPES

Containers - We offer 20', 40' and 45' container. Special requests available.

### MODIFICATIONS AVAILABLE

- Personnel Doors
- Windows
- Roll Doors
- Vents
- Skylight
- Special Request Modifications

D18-3/103

**Call Andrew for a Quote Today!**  
**503-265-4106 • email achrest@cgin.com**