

Running dairy still labor of love for farmer, family

By DAVE LEDER
For the Capital Press

For Jason Sheehan, owning a dairy farm isn't just a job; it's a lifestyle.

When raising and milking cows is all you've ever known, it's easy to get out of bed every morning.

If you ask Sheehan, part-owner of J&K Dairy in Sunnyside, Wash., everyone should be so lucky.

"I don't look at it as work because I enjoy what I do every single day," said Sheehan, who grew up on a dairy farm in Minnesota before partnering with his wife, Karen, and her parents, Tony and Brenda Veiga, in 2002. "When you feel like you haven't worked a day in your life, you appreciate it that much more."

The Sheehans and Veigas manage about 1,000 acres of farmland in Sunnyside, milking 3,000 cows and producing about 250,000 pounds of milk per day.

With the help of 34 employees, J&K Dairy also maintains a variety of feed crops, carrying on a family tradition that started in 1978 in Turlock, Calif.

The Veigas moved the business to Sunnyside in 1981 and to its current location on East Edison Road in 1991. It was called Veiga Dairy until 2004.

They are part-owners and remain involved in the big decisions, but after 40 years in the industry, the couple is content to let the younger generation take the reins.

"We make some of the bigger management decisions as a team, but the day-to-day decisions are made by Karen and me," said Sheehan, 43. "Tony and Brenda are starting to think about retirement and they are trying to pass it on to us."

As the Veigas consider the



Dave Leder/For the Capital Press

Jason Sheehan owns J&K Dairy in Sunnyside, Wash., with his wife, Karen, and her parents, Tony and Brenda Veiga. They milk 3,000 cows and produce about 250,000 pounds of milk per day.

next chapter in their lives, the Sheehans' four children — ages 13, 11, 9 and 5 — are already being groomed to take over the farm someday.

While it's difficult to know what the kids will do in their careers, the Sheehans know they are teaching them important life skills that may one day translate to dairy farm management.

"The kids spend a lot of time with us out here," he said. "They all take part in different ways, and they are learning new things every day. They understand the value of agriculture, farming and hard work, just like my wife and I did growing up."

Sheehan's 9-year-old son, Andrew, is out the door with him at 5 a.m. most days, feeding the calves, cleaning up the grounds and driving the tractor.

The older kids, Jared and Claire, have their own responsibilities, while little sister Annelise acts as a "supervisor" as she learns the daily routine. Even the family dog,

Maple, fills an important role.

"The cows love her and she loves them," Sheehan said of the golden Labrador mix that was rescued along the highway in 2016. "They have become pretty good friends."

The family is reminded every day why they enjoy what they do.

After all, they get to be outside, work with animals, contribute to the local economy and provide an essential food product to consumers across the country.

The family hopes to keep J&K Dairy running for many years to come, investing in technology and environmental compliance so they are prepared for the future.

Sheehan said the family may eventually purchase more farmland, but for now, he and his wife are content to continue what they have been doing since they were kids.

"We have a true passion for farming and for cows," he said. "Working on a dairy isn't for everyone, but it's all we've ever known. We love it."



Ag is constantly evolving. So are we.

The businesses we finance – in farming, ranching, forestry and fishing – are ever changing. We embrace agriculture's dynamic nature and operate on the leading edge, interpreting trends, pitfalls and opportunities. When it comes to managing change, we're right there with you.

800.743.2125 | northwestfcs.com

Equal Housing Lender
This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Here to Help You Grow®