

Partners launch state-of-the-art organic dairy

By DIANNA TROYER
For the Capital Press

To supply organic milk for Glanbia Foods' cheese production, three partners in southeastern Idaho opened Nature Ridge Organic Dairy in 2016, relying on steady production from their Holstein/Jersey cows.

"We like the components of a Jersey and the production of a Holstein and started milking in December 2016," said Kevin Schroeder, who along with Reed Gibby and Ray Robinson began the business because Glanbia needed more milk for its increasingly popular organic market.

"We're heading into our next lactation cycle," said Schroeder, while watching a morning milking from a mezzanine. Cows wait their turn in a holding pen with a capacity of 330 before being milked during a six-minute ride on a 60-stall rotating carousel.

"Some of them like it so much, they don't want to get off," said Schroeder, estimating the dairy's 2,450 Holstein/Jersey cows produce about 111,000 pounds of milk daily.



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Tyler Gilbert manages the dairy, where about 111,000 pounds of milk is produced daily and chilled in tanks.

Before starting the dairy, the three partners had known each other and each brought their expertise to the new business. Schroeder specializes in purchasing feed and in recycling and disposal of agricultural waste products.

Robinson, a member of a co-op called High Desert Milk in Burley, owns dairies that milk 20,000 cows daily.

Gibby had started a pig farm in the area and found some ground that had been out of production for decades, making it ideal to develop as an organic dairy because no chemicals or commercial fertilizers had been used on it.

To be certified organic, the dairy must comply with federal standards and be certified by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture.



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Kevin Schroeder, a partner who started the dairy, specializes in feed acquisition.

"This is our first organic farm," Schroeder said. "We learned about the rules and regulations you have to comply with to be certified. Compared to a traditional dairy, production costs are a little higher, but you can sell the milk for a little more to offset that."

All hay, grains, and minerals must be certified organic. Affidavits documenting that information accompany

each load of feed that arrives at the dairy. The business is routinely audited.

Nutrition for dairy cows is a complex science.

"Heifers, lactating cows, and dry cows have different diets," said Schroeder. "Most people don't realize how precisely the ingredients of their diets are controlled."

As a loader scoops feed from storage areas and places it in a hopper, a computerized scales weighs the hay, grain, minerals, other nutrients and water to get the proper amounts.

When he began managing the dairy and the 30 employees, Tyler Gilbert became familiar with organic regulations.

"It's been a good learning experience," said Gilbert, citing a few of the rules.

Thirty percent of the cows' diet has to come from fresh grass during the grazing season from May to September. The cows are rotated through different sections of pastures on the 1,650-acre farm.

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