

Western innovator: Dairy profits on pampered cows

Organic milk 'clearly a product consumers want,' produced at 600 family farms

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Carol Ryan Dumas



Greg Heidemann, left, and Ron Schnur of Horizon Organic Dairy visit the cows, which are off pasture because of inclement weather. The cows are out on pasture from May until the first snow.

PAUL, Idaho -- At Horizon Organic's dairy, cows move at their own pace from the barns to the pastures and finally to the rotary milking parlor, where they calmly chew their cud as they ride the carousel.

"This calmness and contentedness is the output of everything we do on the dairy, all the love and care," said Ron Schnur, Horizon's vice president of dairy supply and operations.

Contented cows have been the backbone of Horizon production for more than 20 years, the farm managers said.

"It's all about cow comfort; the cows pay our bills," said Greg Heidemann, Horizon's director of dairy operations.

The leading brand of organic milk on the market, Horizon is produced by more than 600 family farms in 23 states.

"It's clearly a product consumers want; it's sustainable and environmentally friendly," Schnur said.

Horizon originally leased the Paul farm and converted it to organic in the early 1990s and purchased it shortly thereafter.

Horizon was founded by Mark Retzloff and Paul Repetto in Boulder, Colo., in 1991 and was the first company to supply organic milk nationally. Dean Foods purchased the company in 2004 and made it part of its WhiteWave Foods division.

More than 20 years ago, Horizon helped pioneer organic production practices and standards that are part of the USDA organic regulations today, said Luana Hancock, corporate communications manager for WhiteWave. Horizon's annual revenue is more than \$500 million, she said.

In addition to the 2,400 milking cow farm in Paul, the company owns and operates a 500 milking cow farm in Kennedyville, Md.

"It allows us to know firsthand what our dairy farmers deal with every day. We know how challenging and rewarding it is," Schnur said.

Safety and cow welfare are top priorities, he said.

Horizon has long advocated for clear and tough organic standards, and its focus is on high-quality milk and bettering the environment, Heidemann said. That demands an integrated operation of certified organic calves, certified organic pasture and raising certified organic feed, he said.

The Paul farm grows 100 percent of its forage needs and about 75 percent of its total feed needs. Manure from the dairy is composted and applied to cropland and pastures.

"Soil fertility is high due to compost, crop rotation and the use of just a few approved soil amendments," Heidemann said.

"The bottom line is we exceed the (organic) pasture regs," he said.

Animals are on pasture until the snow flies and are turned out again in the first weeks of May.

They are moved from one paddock to the next to keep the 4,000 acres of pasture sustainable.

"It gives you a good feeling seeing cows on pasture ... exhibiting their natural behavior,"

Heidemann said.

The dairy artificially inseminates its cows, crossbreeding for grazing-friendly, durable animals with strong feet, legs and udders, and they don't have much in the way of health problems, he said.

Some of the dairy's cows live to the age of 9, and the oldest cow is on its 11th lactation. Average lifespan on a commercial dairy is 6 to 7 years, with three or four lactations.

Horizon's holistic system of caring for the cows and the land is continually evolving. The staff at the Paul facility is learning and trying to improve, Heidemann said.

Dairy farmers must have a passion for organic management, he said, adding that it's important for the integrity of the organic industry.

"Organic is a great way of dairying and a great way of living. As more farmers come into organic dairying, we want to support it any way we can," he said.

Horizon Dairy

Location: Paul, Idaho

Employees: 65

Milking cows: 2,400

Total acres: 8,939

Pasture acres: 4,030