

Two Different Stories, Same Goals

The Nebraska dairy industry offers opportunities for diversity

“Maintain a family-oriented dairy farm that produces affordable, nutritious milk.”

That very simple but robust mission statement drives Classic Dairy, located in southeast Nebraska near **Diller**. The dairy has been operating for 22 years and supports several generations of the Engelman family, whose farming roots run deep.

While Classic Dairy is a prime example of a modern-day Nebraska family dairy operation, approximately 180 miles to the northeast near **Emerson**, is another dairy that is much larger, has a slightly different operating structure and supports many families. Wakefield Farms LLP began milking cows just four years ago but has had a significant impact on the local economy.

The two dairies have different stories that reflect the diversity of Nebraska’s dairy industry, an industry that looks for continued expansion and welcomes an array of dairy operations.

Classic Dairy: It Started with Two Brothers

Back in the mid-90s, Dean and Gail Engelman decided that if they were going to continue to farm, their best option was to team together and begin a dairy operation. They expanded their 150-cow dairy herd to 600 head and incorporated Classic Dairy in 1996.

Also expanding were Dean’s and Gail’s families. Dean and his wife, Ann, eventually had three children (two sons and a daughter) while Gail and his wife, Brenda, had two daughters. The two brothers discovered very quickly that trying to run a dairy by themselves was extremely time consuming leaving little time to spend with their families. Dean said he and Gail came up with a master plan.

“We were milking something like 18 hours a day, so Gail and I said, ‘let’s expand,’” Dean said.





The Engelman Family owns and operates Classic Dairy in southeast Nebraska, near Diller. From left: Ann, Dean, Amie, Evan and Adam Engelman.

The idea sounded a bit crazy to their spouses at first. However, the brothers explained that by growing their herd they could produce a lot more milk, which meant they would be in a financial position to hire more employees.

They eventually grew their herd to the present number of 1,100 cows. That has allowed them to hire up to 16 full-time employees.

"We have a really good work force," said Dean's wife, Ann. "We have one employee who has been with us since the beginning, and two others who have been here for 15 years. We provide housing for our employees allowing most of them to live within seven miles of the dairy if they so choose."

Ann said that they encourage their employees to support local schools and businesses, and remember the same lesson the Engelmans learned early on.

"We expanded our dairy so we could spend more time with our families, and we want our employees to be able to do the same thing," she said.

Raising row crops is a big part of the Classic Dairy operation, which includes 3,500 acres of corn, soybeans and alfalfa.

"We raise all our own dry corn and corn silage and about half of the alfalfa we use," said Dean. "We have enough land, and it's close enough in proximity, to allow us to utilize the manure from the dairy as fertilizer."

Utilizing the manure is just one aspect of Classic Dairy's sustainability and conservation plan. That plan starts with efficient use of water.

"Even though we have a good water supply here, we want to utilize it the best we can so we use it four ways," said Dean.

The first use of the water is to cool down the milk. From there the water goes to a holding silo and then it is used to flush out the milking parlor. After that, the water goes into lagoons to be used a third time to flush the free stall area where the cows are housed and then finally it is used to irrigate cropland.

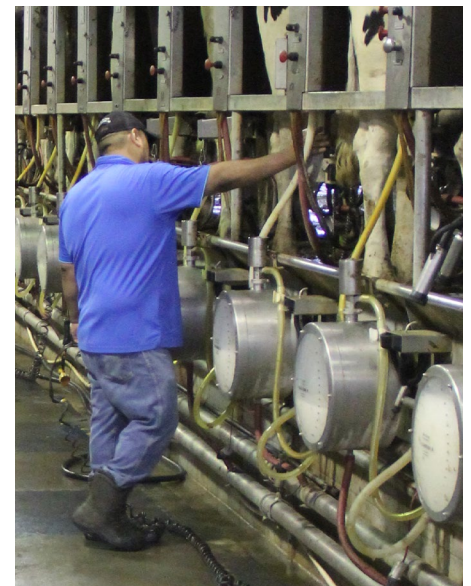
Other conservation practices incorporated by the dairy include crop rotation, using a windmill to generate about 15 percent of the facility's electricity, and recycling the sand where the cows bed.

Another important initiative for the Engelmans is outreach. Every five years, Classic Dairy holds an open house, which is attended by 500 to 600 area residents. The dairy also hosts numerous tours for students, FFA chapters and local agri-businesses throughout the year.

"Not only do students come to our farm, but my dad brought two baby calves to the elementary school where I work in Ralston," said Dean's daughter, Amie. "The kids got to feed and pet them. They also watched a virtual reality video of the dairy on the internet."

Amie and her two brothers, Adam and Evan, recently bought their retiring uncle's share of the dairy and plan to keep Classic Dairy running strong for years to come.

A Classic Dairy employee checks on the cows in the milking parlor.



Wakefield Farms LLP...Say Cheese

Approximately 300,000 pounds (34,900 gallons) a day, that's how much milk Wakefield Farms' dairy ships out to a cheese plant (**Agropur**) in Hull, Iowa. The facility then turns that powerful protein into 15 different types of cheese.

It takes a lot of cows (4,500) to produce that much milk, and it takes a lot of feedstocks to fuel the cows, which is good news for the farmers in Dixon County and the surrounding area in northeast Nebraska.

"We feed 25 tons of corn a day," said Greg Bleeker, one of the owners of the dairy. "In addition, we feed roughly 40,000 tons of corn silage a year and about 20,000 tons of haylage a year."

Bleeker said that when he and father-son co-owners, Bud and Lance Mouw, decided to partner up to build a new dairy, it didn't take them long to select a site in Dixon County.

"County officials and the communities embraced the idea of the dairy," said Bleeker. "They understood the value of the dairy both from the consumption of feedstocks, as well as the manure we would produce to be used as a fertilizer. They welcomed us with open arms."

Wakefield Farms also brings another important value to the area, jobs.

"We hire around 43 full-time workers here at the dairy and then

Robotic Dairies Come to Nebraska

Robotic milking machines are not completely new technology, but they are fairly new in Nebraska. There are currently three robotic dairies operating in the state (Plainview, Carlton and Creston) with more expected in the future.



The dairies feature automated equipment that washes the cows' udders and then attaches the milking machine with no human interaction needed. The robotic dairy setup accommodates up to 60 cows at a time.

The cows also wear electronic collars that identify them and their movements and collect other data. The sophisticated computer setup at some of these dairies can measure the amount of feed each cow eats, how much milk it produces each day and health information about each animal.

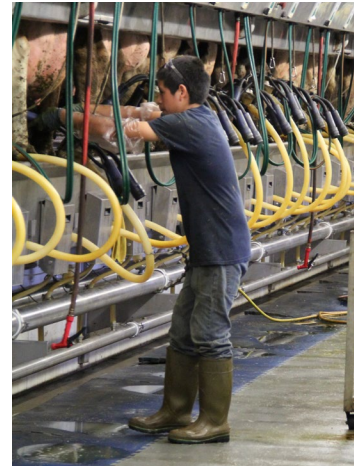
In addition to the robotic milking equipment, there can be large automatic sweepers that roam the parlor floor pushing scattered feed back to where the cows can reach it. When the task is completed, the robotic sweepers hook themselves back up to be recharged.



Rod Johnson, executive director, Nebraska State Dairy Association and Midwest Dairy, said the primary advantage of robotic dairies is labor force management at a time when it can be difficult to find enough outside employees.

"It's been a good way to bring back the next generation to our dairy farms," said Johnson. "Robotic dairies have allowed expansion of current herds, with the possibility of future expansion without having to add employees. It allows for more flexible scheduling, freeing up quality time to be spent with families."

Growth of robotic dairies in Nebraska is expected to be gradual as it does require a strong commitment and significant investment in the operation.



we have another 20 employees at our 6,000-head calf ranch just up the road from here,” said Bleeker.

Those 63 jobs mean pumping money into the local communities and generating tax dollars for village and county governments.

One of the challenges for the dairy industry nationally has been the ability to maintain a reliable workforce. Bleeker said he is fortunate to have some positive factors that has aided Wakefield Farms in attracting workers to its operation.

“Being close to larger population centers like **Sioux City** and **South Sioux City** is part of it,” said Bleeker. “But more importantly is being close to Wakefield. It’s a town that has embraced cultural diversity. Almost my entire workforce is Hispanic, and the families say they like living in **Wakefield**. It’s all been part of me being able to keep a reliable labor force.”

Even with a large number of cows at the dairy, Bleeker says animal care is a top priority in their operation.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re milking two cows or 5,000 cows, it’s still all about each individual cow,” he said.

The cows are housed in large ventilated barns that include a myriad of fans and sprinklers to keep them cool in the summer, and then of course they are insulated from the elements in the winter. Once milked, the cows relax in sand-bedded stalls that are maintained on a regular basis. The animals are also monitored continuously for health.

“I have a crew dedicated to walking pens and pulling any cow that needs a little T-L-C,” said Bleeker. “We put them in our hospital barn and provide them with any type of health care they need whether it’s maintenance or medical treatment.”

And when it comes to how his cows are treated, Bleeker maintains a zero-tolerance policy.

“The fastest way off this farm is to mistreat a cow,” said Bleeker. “One time and you’re out.”

In regards to the future of the dairy industry in Nebraska, Bleeker says, “I think Nebraska is a great place to dairy, but needs more processing. There’s not a lot of processing in Nebraska and when you have to pull product a long way the freight kills you.”

State and industry organizations have teamed together the past several years to make a concerted effort to attract dairy processors to Nebraska and grow the industry as a whole in the state. The Nebraska dairy team includes the **Nebraska State Dairy Association**, the **Nebraska Department of Agriculture**, the **Nebraska Department of Economic Development**, the **University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension**, the **Nebraska Public Power District**, **A-FAN (Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska)**, as well as other local partners. Team members have been active at national trade shows and industry meetings promoting the positive advantages of locating dairies and dairy processing in Nebraska.

With the dairy team’s efforts, and the success of operations like Classic Dairy and Wakefield Farms, the industry will continue to be part of growing Nebraska.