

It's still possible to get started in dairying



ITHACA, N.Y. — Although many dairy farmers have been experiencing financial difficulty the past several years, an agricultural finance expert at Cornell University says young men and women are still choosing dairy farming as a career.

There are many ways to enter farming, such as renting, buying, partnership, farm employment, and part-time farming. All can be viable options with a reasonable chance of success, according to John Brake who recently completed a study of how New York State farmers entered the business.

"Most of the ways to get started in farming can be successful if the farmer is careful," says Brake, the W.I. Myers Professor of Agricultural Finance in the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell. The study of 37 farmers was conducted with research associate Marc A. Smith.

Innovative options

"Farmers in heavy debt are usually under the greatest financial pressure, so beginning farmers might well consider innovative options that don't require the borrowing of large sums of money."

Farmers in the study were not random selections, but rather were chosen by Brake and Smith to represent a wide variety of ways to enter farming.

Farmer investments in the study ranged from \$12,500 to \$697,000 and averaged \$263,387. The number of cows owned or leased was from 11 to 150; cropping ranged from zero to 600 acres.

"Getting started in farming is a complicated, risky process," Brake points out. "The margin for error in beginning farm management decisions is small. Make the wrong decision, or even fail to make an important decision, and you could be finished."

More alternatives

Nevertheless, Brake maintains that starting and surviving in a farm business is probably no more difficult than in many other small businesses.

"In fact, there are likely more alternatives for help for those getting started in farming than for any other category of businessmen," Brake says, referring to Cooperative Extension agricultural agents, lenders, other farmers, friends, and relatives.

He and Smith did not find a particular route of entry that ensures success more than any other; yet the study did highlight some common mistakes made by beginning farmers — mistakes that sometimes were fatal for the business.

Common pitfalls

Brake, therefore, is able to suggest ways to avoid common pitfalls:

— Always have a written contract with your partner (s), landlord, lessor, or other business associates. "Even if your partner is your father, a written contract is extremely important to keep terms clear — for both parents and children," Brake says.

— Plan well. "Several of our farmers made the mistake of not having enough feed for the winter. By the time they needed it, they were very short of cash."

— Carefully check out farm resources such as land, machinery, and the health of your herd before you are committed to purchasing or renting them. "Some of our farmers, for example, bought bred heifers without having pregnancy verified by a veterinarian," Brake says. "Others didn't test their soil. Still others leased or bought used machinery without a thorough check. These can be very serious mistakes."

— Don't attribute poor results to bad luck. "Describing poor management of the business as bad luck won't work. Problems must be recognized and solutions found. Most problems are the result of poor management, unforeseen circumstances, and the inability to respond in an appropriate way," Brake points out.

Get advice

— Get quality advice for all major decisions. "There is an abundance of expertise available to starting farmers. It should be used," Brake advises.

— Don't be afraid to be creative and innovative. "Resourcefulness in getting control of resources and in adjusting to and recovering from farm entry setbacks was a valuable asset that contributed to the eventual establishment of successful farm businesses," Brake says.

Although 1984 is another tough year for dairy farmers, there will still be some people who want to start dairying.

"There's always a turnover of

farmers as some older farmers retire or die. Some replacement should occur every year. Just because a few years are tough doesn't mean that young people shouldn't start farming. Sometimes it's good to start when things are tough because times can only get better."

Some of the farmers Brake and Smith studied started in 1979, when times were good, paid top dollar for land and cows, for example, and then saw values erode. "One never knows until several years later whether a particular year was a good time to start," Brake concludes.

The study report, AE Research 83-86, is available throughout New York State at numerous county offices of Cornell Cooperative Extension, or from the Department of Agricultural Economics, Warren Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

USDA cites weather emergency

COLLEGE STATION, Tex. — Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block has announced emergency measures implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to aid producers in areas still affected by a continuing drought and other adverse weather conditions.

Block said the emergency measures include expanding the emergency feed assistance program, allowing haying and grazing on cropland taken out of production in the 1984 farm programs, and providing assistance to livestock producers in locating hay or other roughage.

Approval for haying and grazing privileges on idled cropland in the 1984 farm programs will

be given on a county-by-county basis. Producers should contact their local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office for information on obtaining these privileges. Block said he has directed ASCS to give requests for approval highest priority. "I would like to see a 24 to 48-hour turnaround in handling the requests," he said.

The agency also is providing the assistance in locating hay or other roughage for livestock producers to purchase. All ASCS offices will maintain updated lists of producers who have hay or other roughage available for sale in each state. Producers needing assistance should contact their local offices, Block said.

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