

# Fire Puts Expansion On Hold For Brendle Farms

**GAY BROWNLEE**

**Somerset Co. Correspondent  
SOMERSET (Somerset Co.)**—

It was a typical late-afternoon June workday when Brendle Farms employees switched off the systems at the farm and began the usual end-of-day cleanup in the candling, grading, and packing department of Somerset County's biggest egg operation. Another day was over. It was time to go home.

Friday would be a repeat, with some workers helping to construct the new third barn to house an additional 180,000 white leghorn chickens.

At his Colorado mountain retreat, owner Robert Brendle was enjoying some isolated peace, knowing his experienced son, Mike, Brendle Farms landowner, would easily handle the operation in his absence. From the poultry barns, Mike's home is about a mile and a half away.

Minutes after 7 p.m., Mike's telephone started ringing. It was the second call made by a neighbor located near the barns. The first was to 9-1-1 to summon local volunteer firemen to the scene because smoke and flames were coming from the barn.

Sipesville firemen and Mike, coming from opposite directions, minutes later, arrived simultaneously.

"The flames were 30 to 40 feet high when I got here," said Mike. "I knew it must have started in the back end where the fans are located."

Other volunteer fire companies arrived — 11 of them — but Sipesville Fire Chief Mark Zambanini was in charge.

The situation posed extreme risk for firefighters because of potential entrapment — poultry barns have long aisles and high tiers of chicken cages around which the unfamiliar firemen must move in thick smoke and heavy gear.

"If the cages collapse, buckle and fall, they are trapped," said Brendle. "It's awful risky to go into the building."

Brendle knew at best all the firefighters could do was protect the connecting structures. The barns are conjoined for automation. But it was imperative to save the methane digester. That the barn would be lost was a certainty.

"I told him (Zambanini) I had never heard of one being saved," said Brendle.

So he was unprepared for what happened when the Class A foam took over. Still amazed, Brendle said, "By the time they threw that foam in there, it was only five minutes until they put it down. It did a spartan job. They did an impossible job."

Later, it was learned that while Class A foam smothers flames like a blanket, at \$15 a gallon it is much too expensive for the majority of rural volunteer fire companies to afford in great quantities.

Mike Brendle wishes that situation was different because he can't contain his praise for the local volunteer fire departments. He wishes they had funding sources other than fund drives and fundraisers that would enable them to purchase the foam.

Although only half the barn burned, the loss was hefty, at \$333,000. Thirty thousand birds perished as a result. And now, it's as if they weren't expanding because the Brendle-raised pullets entering the new barn can merely keep egg production where it was before the fire.

Brendle said it will take another year, but they will continue working to rebuild and expand the operation which serves four surrounding counties with fresh eggs — Cambria, Bedford, Somerset, and Westmoreland.

"It takes a year to start a pole building," said Brendle, "until you install the wiring and insulation put on the aluminum skin and chipboard inside."

Brendle said the fire was traced to the newest of the 17 fans working full tilt to ventilate the now partially-destroyed barn. He said that despite the loss, eggs continued to be produced and shipped to market the next day.

"We didn't miss one day of production," he said. "We picked them out by hand Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

Brendle said he's responsible for the Brendle crops. "Dad owns the birds and I take care of the fields," he said. "We're blessed that my father is here and that we can work together."

Although Brendle raises 20 percent of the poultry feed on the 550-acre spread, trucking the rest from Ohio has proven the most economical option, he said.

Robert Brendle wasn't always a poultryman. In fact, he was a dairyman, milking some 90 head of the big Holsteins. After his wife



A fire on June 16 was stopped halfway in the poultry barn of Brendle Farms, Somerset, when volunteer firemen threw Class A foam on it. Here is the outside of the barn showing damage at the far end.



Robert Brendle, left, and his son, Mike Brendle, stand at the entry of a new poultry barn that's under construction. It was intended to expand the egg operation, the largest in Somerset County, until a recent fire destroyed half of another barn, causing death for some 30,000 birds.

took a nasty kick from one of the cows, Robert decided dairying was not for him. It was "for the birds (pun intended).

"This is more like an eight to five job," Robert said. He said that as soon as he learned about the fire, he had to return to Somerset County. No matter how beautiful

and relaxing Colorado had been, the loss to his business wiped out his pleasure in being there, he said.

Robert's wife is Betty.

Mike and his wife, Harriet, have four children ranging in age from 13 to one year. He is the governor's appointed poultry rep-

resentative on the Agricultural Advisory Board to the state Department of Environmental Resources, and also president of the local water company.

Brendle Farms employs seven full time and seven part time, including dad and son, according to Mike.

## Lebanon Dairy Refunds Total \$149,000

**NORTH CORNWALL (Lebanon Co.)** — Lebanon County Dairy producers who reduced or did not increase their 1993 milk marketings filed 96 applications and received refunds totaling \$148,998 according to Jenifer Minnich, county executive director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

The cash payments were issued to dairy producers in the county under the Dairy Refund Payment Program (DRPP), authorized by the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Acts of 1990 and 1993.

"Producers who provided evidence that they did not market more milk in 1993 than in 1992 were eligible to receive the entire amount deducted from their milk proceeds if they met the eligibility requirements and claimed the refund by March 15," Minnich said.

The 1990 Act provides that the

11.25 cents per hundredweight milk marketing assessment will be increased on May-December milk marketings each year to compensate for refunds made for the previous year.

Therefore, effective May 1, 1994, the assessment was increased by 8.03 cents for a total of 19.28 cents per hundredweight. ASCS official Minnich said this rate will remain in effect throughout the remainder of this year, and will revert to 11.25 cents per hundredweight on January 1, 1995.

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Mike Brendle stands beside a hold that firemen cut in a poultry barn when fire broke out in June. Brendle Farms lost above 30,000 chickens to fire and smothering in the \$333,000 loss.