

Planning For Future Key For These Susquehanna County Farmers

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"When a farm is sold around here it is purchased for the most part by an absentee owner," said Mark. "It's cost-prohibitive to buy land for dairy farming right here in the shadows of Elk Mountain."

So far the Wilmots have been lucky. They've been able to rent additional land at a very low price.

Although in the past they had considered buying more land, today they are happy leasing the ground they need and take care of the ground as if it were their own.

They do realize that the day may come when they can no longer rent the ground for farming purposes. That's why the Wilmots have an agreement in writing that ensures them some protection.

"We have it in writing, so we have use of the land for two years after we pay one year's rent to get our seed and fertilizer out of it," said Sandy. "We looked into buying more land when we were younger, but now we're not paying the taxes in rent, so it's stupid to think about buying."

Said Mark, "You're also a little more open when the day comes that you don't want to milk cows. You don't have all this land and wonder what to do with it."

One of eight children, Mark was born and raised on this farm, and knew he wanted to farm from the start.

"I graduated from high school in 1964 and it seemed that all I wanted to do was take over the farm," said Mark.

Sandra was not born on a farm, but got a fast agricultural education when her parents moved from

New Jersey to a nearby farm when she was 10 years old.

Her father and mother wanted something that they could do together, so out of their three options — a hotel, gas station, or a farm — they chose farming.

"They didn't know what machine did what, they didn't know what you did when, they didn't know you had to breed a cow to make her give milk... they knew nothing. I thought it was great, because I was learning everything at the same time they were. We were a unit all working together. I thought I moved to heaven," said Sandy.

Even though times were tough, Sandy knew at the age of 12 she wanted to marry a farmer.

So in 1969, Mark and Sandra purchased the farm. A few years later they built an addition on the barn and on the house. They had two children, Eric and Julie, neither of whom are interested in taking over the farm.

Eric is in his last year at Carnegie-Mellon, studying industrial design, and Julie is in her second year at the College of Pharmacy in Albany, N.Y.

The realization that they will not farm forever coupled with the fact that neither of their children was interested in taking over the farm provided two of the reasons why Sandy participated in the Dairy MAP program last winter.

In the course of the program, participants learned about decision-making, developing long-range plans, making lists, and communicating with others.

"Everyone (who participated)

got something different out of it," said Sandy. "Because whatever your weakness was, that's what you picked up on. I think the point was to make you realize how much you're handling and how much is really on your shoulders, and so you just don't assume it's all going to take care of itself. You've got to really sit down and really do a good job of thinking things out and planning things. If something's a problem, you've got to handle it."

Another plus of the program is that it provides an opportunity to get together with other farmers and compare notes.

"I really enjoy getting together with other farmers and just talking about your problems. Farmers always complain. They complain about the price of milk, they complain about how much work they do, oh they just complain... always have, always will. But this doesn't solve anything. All it does is make others think you're a bunch of bellyachers. But when you go to something like this and somebody directs the conversation so that you're actually talking and not complaining, you always get a lot out of it yourself because you always have things you can take home with you," she said.

Instructors often stress the importance of writing things down, a task that Sandy had already mastered.

"You never really know how much you do until you write the things down," she said. "If you write down what you do instead of always saying I have to do this and I have to do that, I think you feel

better."

The Wilmots milk 45 Holsteins and raise 40-45 heifers. They made the move from grade to registered animals about 15 years ago in order to increase the value of their herd.

"We bought about 10 registered calves per year," said Sandy. "Bobby 'TR' Williams found us good calves. We did that for three years."

Once all the replacements were registered, the Wilmots gradually weeded out the grade animals.

"Now they're all registered and homebred," said Mark. "We have a closed herd."

Currently their herd averages 21,700 pounds of milk with 618 pounds of protein and 787 pounds of fat.

Although they are former members of NFO and still believe in the principles of the organization, the Wilmots are now independent producers and ship to Reddington Farms in New Jersey.

"I still am a firm believer (that) if farmers gripe and complain about the price of milk and if they want a certain price, the farmers have to price it. NFO is the only organization that I've ever found that seems as if they have a viable way of doing that," said Mark.

The NFO membership dropped after other farmers slowly moved to cooperatives or stopped farming.

Because there is no hired labor on the Wilmot's farm, the two try to make the most of everything. They do more haylage than dry hay and try to do more with mechanical help.

They also raise their own corn for corn silage and feed a topdressing formulated by their nutritionist.

For the past few years, Sandra has also bred the cows herself using the top bulls in the industry. "I'm doing pretty well," she said.

The future for the Wilmots is exciting. They hope to be out of debt in the next four years and are looking at all of their options.

"The kids will be out of college in four years, and basically we'll be out of our long-term debt. That way we can milk fewer cows, or sell the cows and raise heifers. It will give us infinite options," said Sandra.

The couple has also tried to take control of their financial situation so they can retire comfortably without selling everything they have worked for.

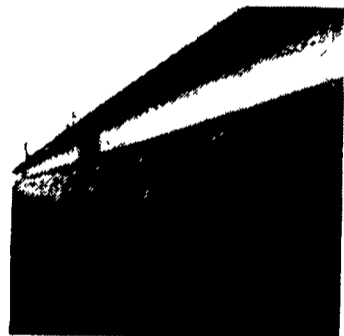
"We've poured money into the farm, literally, for the past 25 years. And then when the kids started college, you look at things differently. It used to be a family farm and we all did things together. And we enjoyed working together. But without the kids, all of a sudden it's just Mark and me working hard. It really changes things. We didn't know it would change our outlook on the whole farm."

"Now we say, well, the farm is nice, but let's go visit the kids. All of a sudden it's back to farming and we have to change our goals."

Ironically, just before attending the MAP program, the Wilmots had a chance to focus on the

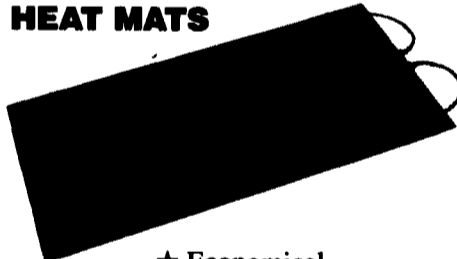
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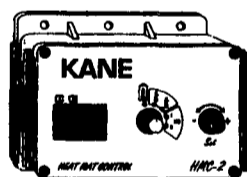
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