

Aquaculture Is Growing

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NEWARK, Del. — Most of the income on the dairy farm comes from the sale of milk and, on some farms, the sale of dairy products — cheese, yogurt, cream and butter.

The latter is especially true for a large number of U.S. dairy goat farmers and the newly emerging U.S. dairy sheep farmer.

In some parts of the world — France, Italy, Spain, Greece and Norway, for example — dairy goats and sheep historically have had great economic importance, even more than dairy cows.

In fact, in recent years this business has increased in volume and importance as an alternative survival enterprise in response to the crippling effects of the cow milk quota system.

Thank God our country has been wise enough to stay clear of a milk quota system. However, when milk prices are as low as they have been recently — too low for some farmers to survive — we think about alternatives.

Selling cows, heifers, calves, bulls, semen and ova for breeding purposes has been profitable for some dairy farmers, but not the majority. And selling cull cows, dairy steers and veal calves has al-

ways been subject to market price fluctuations.

The variations are due, in part, to ups and downs in the meat market and to media influences against certain kinds of meat.

Nevertheless, over the years, the dairy business has been more stable than the beef, grain, sheep and seafood industries.

Horror stories of overfishing and diseases of fish and oysters that threaten the livelihoods of those who fish the sea or bays, like here on the Chesapeake, make us thankful by comparison for the lesser problems in the dairy industry.

Yet these people can survive, if they accept more drastic changes than the dairy business has had to go through recently. Instead of going to sea or trolling the rivers and bay, they can become farmers — aquaculture farmers — as many already have.

In the last 20 years, aquaculture has grown from non-existence in this country into a very respectable industry.

Under today's economic squeeze, some dairy farmers also have ventured into aquaculture, because it is reassuring to know that there is no quota and no surplus, prices are good and, apparently, there is tremendous poten-

tial for market growth.

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating this venture, or any venture, away from my dear dairy business.

However, you may have read about recent debates on milk market prices, that the "Compact" idea for better prices in New York State was defeated by more powerful city politics.

Also, modernization or enlargement for greater efficiencies means going more into debt per cow if the farmgate milk price is insufficient.

I only want to discuss some parallels with other farming businesses and their potential as alternatives.

When I opened the last issue of the excellent agribusiness magazine "Feedstuffs" from June 29, 1998, volume 70, issue 26, I saw many interesting articles on aquaculture.

This weekly magazine helps us understand market dynamics (including the dairy business in the short and long term), technical articles for better nutrition and feed formulation, and news about supplements, vitamins and minerals.

So what is happening with aquaculture and why should dairy farmers be concerned?

Of course, aquaculture will affect sales of veal, dairy beef and even cull cows, because aquaculture produces a highly competitive "meat," at a very efficient feed-to-food conversion rate — even better than broiler production.

Pond-raised fish is a highly desirable protein from both the consumer and human nutrition standpoint, and it is cheaper to produce than catch.

Fish is cheaper to produce than veal on the dairy farm, which is the only other truly "white meat" competing with chicken.

Aquaculture has its roots in China, dating back 4,000 years. The dairy industry, on the other hand, is still in its infancy there, as I personally observed two years ago.

While you can find imported dairy foods in some Chinese stores and restaurants, you would have a hard time finding milking cows or goats. This makes the potential market in China a tremendous opportunity for imports from the United States.

Aquaculture, however, is big in China. Fresh water fish such as carp were produced there at 900,000 tons/year in the 1980s, but by 1996, this amount had increased tenfold to 11 million tons. The number is expected to double once again in the next 10 years.

This tonnage compares to the total world sea capture of 100 million tons, which was reached in 1990 and appears to be leveling off or decreasing since.

The first trout farms in the United States were established in 1871, but commercial aquaculture in this country began in the 1960s — starting in the South with the catfish and expanding rapidly to other species.

University of Arkansas research has shown that new carp products are as acceptable, or better than, tuna products. Soon we may see carp on our store shelves.

Even alligator farming is now part of aquaculture in Florida, where more than 30 farms produce 300,000 pounds meat/year and 15,000 skins with farmgate prices of \$5 to \$7/pound meat and \$25/skin, and a projected market demand for 2 million skins by the year 2000.

In Alabama, existing ponds (about 17,000 acres) are used for catfish farming as a supplemental income by some 130+ producers, yielding more than \$500,000 worth of fish/year, and an increase to 135,000 acres of potential ponds is expected.

In Maine, it is coastal aquaculture, which produces \$43 million worth of fish, clams, oysters and

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In Good Growing Season

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In 1994, a brutal cold early in the year destroyed fruit buds. The peach crop was diminished, but the growers reported a fair apple crop. Peaches are far more sensitive to cold than apples.

Overall, 1995 was a "really good year for us," Scholl noted. "We had a consistent apple crop."

In 1996 a frost damaged some of the peach and nectarine blossoms. However, 1998 was a "good year," he noted. There was too much rain in June and not enough in July, but overall "the size of the crop has been good and the quality has stood out," he noted. Dry, sunny weather improves the sugar content of fruit.

George Scholl works full-time as a claims investigator for an insurance company and maintains the trees. Faith, his wife, runs the farm market, dealing with the customers.

"Actual tree work to me is therapy," George said.

Faith noted that the whole family is involved in thinning the peaches and apples and caring for the trees.

Sometimes, "people don't understand all the work that goes into getting nice fruit," said George. That includes all the planting, fertilization, cultivation, and pruning.

Those who help on the orchard include the Scholl brothers, Jacob, 16, a sophomore at Freedom High School and Ben, 19, a business student at Elizabethtown College. Two daughters help when they can, including Martha, 23, a graduate of Moravia College who works full-time as a graphic artist, and Emily, 21, a student at Northampton Community College who is an intern at Disneyworld in Florida.

The orchard also has help from George's nephew, David Brackenbury, 20, a student at Community College of Vermont. Part-time work is also provided by Betty Jaxheimer, George's aunt, who lives nearby and helps out at the farm market.

Scholl understands ways to make a farm market successful.

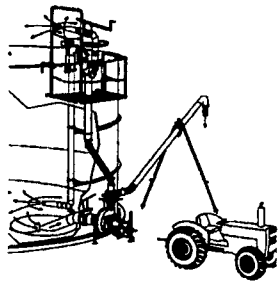
"That's the beauty of the business," he said. "People come here and they can tie your face to what you're growing and selling. In the supermarket, people don't always know where the fruit and vegetables are grown. Large amounts of produce are grown outside of the United States. They enjoy working directly with a grower that they know." The Scholl customer base has been increased simply by word of mouth.

With the limited amount of time and space, "we are comfortable where we are," said Scholl, noting the fact the orchard is into its fourth generation. "We intend to keep this as a family business, one generation to the next."

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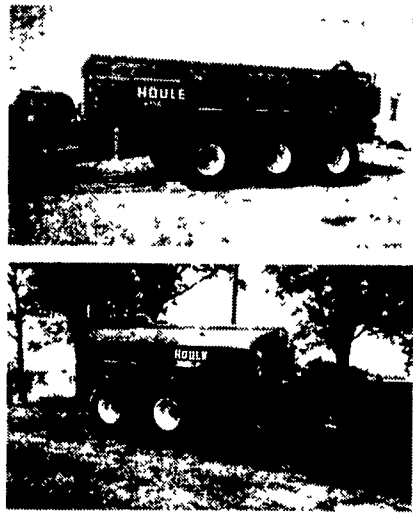
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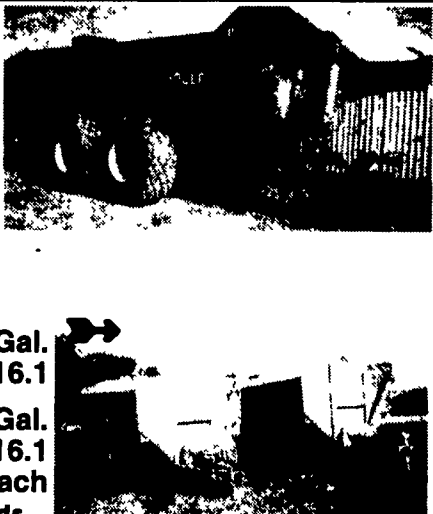
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