

# Legislators Tour Agricultural Businesses



Federal legislative aides tour Burkholder Farms state-of-the-art milking parlor.

CHAMBERSBURG (Franklin Co.) — Legislative aides from the offices of Sen. Arlen Specter, Rep. George Gekas, Sen. Rick Santorum, Rep. Bud Shuster, and Rep. Tim Holden recently spent a day learning about Pennsylvania agriculture. They toured the Burkholder dairy farm in Chambersburg, and the Rice Fruit Company in Gardners to hear first hand the issues facing the agricultural production industry today. AgChoice Farm Credit sponsored the event.

"Aides and legislators, unless they are farmers today, do not really understand what agricultural production is all about and how farming is conducted," said Richard Ringer, a loan officer with AgChoice. "Likewise, farmers feel far removed from Washington and what goes on there. This day is an educational encounter for all of us."

The day quickly put to rest the idyllic myth of small farm life. "Legislators and the general public alike hold on to the American

ideal of the small, family farm. Today's family farms, like the Burkholder's, are entrepreneurial and must be profitable," said Ringer.

"The days of pitch forks and bib overalls are long-since gone," said Stanley Burkholder of Burkholder Farms.

Small family productions are out of necessity evolving into expanded business ventures. Both the Burkholder and the Rice family businesses illustrate the new, bigger face of agricultural business: larger gross sales, higher risk, greater reinvestment resulting in higher debtloads, and an always uncertain bottom line.

The aides saw for themselves the complexities of agriculture production in year 2000. The Burkholders completed a major expansion in 1994 that upgraded their milking, feeding and waste management systems for greater efficiency, but more than doubled their debt load. The expansion has proven more efficient, but whether the risk will pay off remains a gamble. Profitability depends on many factors out of the Burkholders' control, factors like weather, markets and the economy.

"This business is like a poker game where you just keep anteing," said Mark Rice, of Rice

Fruit Company. Most agricultural producers feel a squeeze today. Risk is higher, but the pay-off is uncertain. With agricultural commodities, like apples and milk, the prices paid to the producers bear no relation to the prices consumers pay at the super market. What's worse for most agricultural producers is the imbalance of market power that exists between large food retailers and smaller agricultural production companies. Food retail chains are consolidating every year, with fewer chains supplying more people, giving the chains even more buying clout.

While the face of production agriculture has changed greatly over the last twenty years, one challenge remains constant: accidents of nature. Last year's drought resulted in a \$125,000

loss in crop inventory for the Burkholders. Some of the Rice orchards are within the quarantine area for the Plum Pox virus. That virus has cost the European stone-fruit industry hundreds of millions of dollars over the last forty years and has now appeared in Adams County.

What motivates agricultural producers, like the Rices and the Burkholders to continue? Ties to the land, working with family, the fulfillment of producing food for the public, the lure of self-employment and the satisfaction of meeting the very challenges that drive them crazy daily. Do the rewards outweigh the challenges? It depends on the day you ask the question.

"You have to be an optimist to be an apple grower," said John Rice, also of Rice Fruit Company.



From left, Stanley Burkholder, Richard Ringer, AgChoice Farm Credit, and Clinton Burkholder, at Burkholder Farms.

## Annual Cattle Feeders Summer Workshop

NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — Penn State Cooperative Extension, The Pennsylvania Beef Council, and cattle oriented agri-business companies invite interested people to participate in a Fantasy Beef Quality Challenge at the annual Cattle Feeders Summer Workshop scheduled for Thursday, July 20, at Yoder's Restaurant, New Holland.

The event begins at 6 p.m. with a free ice cream social catered by the workshop sponsors, while the educational meeting gets underway at 7 p.m. Wendall

Landis, a jointly funded employee of Penn State University and the PA Beef Council, will open with comments regarding the Beef Quality Assurance and Blueprint for Success programs that he coordinates.

Following will be a discussion regarding background details of the Fantasy Beef Quality Challenge conducted last year at Texas A & M University and reported in Beef Magazine. The Texas program, sponsored by

Merial, Allflex, AgInfo-Link, and

the Texas Beef Council, evaluated 24 steers of several different breeds and breed crosses to determine the cattle with the highest net returns. The lesson learned from the Texas program was that it's "tough to predict

cattle by visual appraisal."

Participants in the workshop will experience the Texas Beef Quality Challenge and then compete in the Pennsylvania Challenge.

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