

EDITORIAL

Welcome to Small Farm Quarterly!

Welcome to the premier edition of Small Farm Quarterly — a celebration of what farming is all about! And farming is about a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Whether your interest is specialized production, diversification, maximizing profits, or family values; whether your view point is one of a producer, a homemaker, a parent, a grandparent, or a young person; we hope you'll find inspiration, encouragement and useful information in this and future issues of Small Farm Quarterly.

We celebrate small farms for their contribution to communities, to rural economies, to the environment, and to families. Small farms offer one of the best possible environments for raising children and, contrary to popular myth, a well managed small farm can provide a good living. A small farm is "a way of life" as well as a business.

Our focus is on farm families involved in dairy and livestock production, but we'll be including articles on diversification opportunities like vegetables, fruits, woodlots, and agritourism. We welcome all readers. If you're thinking about getting started in farming, or if you work with small farms, or if you're just plain interested in small farms, Small Farm Quarterly is the magazine for you.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A SMALL FARM?

Some folks say a small farm uses mostly family labor. The USDA says a small farm is has less than \$250,000 in gross annual sales. Others say it depends on herd size, or acreage, or how big a tractor you drive. Still others say that small is a mind-set; doing more with less instead of expanding production. There are lots of definitions, and none of them are perfect.

PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT

Successful Small Farms-A Cornerstone Of NY's Dairy Sector

By Dave Smith

Successful small dairy farms are a cornerstone upon which New York's dairy industry is built. Just how important are these smaller farms? And what are the "keys to success" for small dairy farm businesses?

First, what is a small dairy farm? There is no perfect answer (see our editorial in this issue.) For this article we define "smaller herds" as those of less than 100 cows. Depending on milk price and production per cow, this comes pretty close to the definition developed by the USDA Small Farm Commission in 1998, which sets the limit at \$250,000 in gross sales of farm products.

Now, how important are these smaller herds in New York? NY ranks 3rd in the nation in terms of milk production. In 2002

the NY Agricultural Statistics Service reported that nearly 75% of NY's dairy herds fit our smaller farm definition. These herds include 263,000 cows or about 40% of the state's total dairy herd, and they supply about 35% of the milk sold by NY's dairy farms.

New York boasts 14 counties in the "top 100 dairy counties" in the US. What about smaller dairy farms in these counties? In St. Lawrence and Jefferson Counties (39th and 40th in the national ranking) nearly 80% of the herds were less than 100 cows, and these herds accounted for 50% of all the cows in these counties, according to the 1997 Ag Census. In Lewis County (55th in the national ranking) more than 80% of the herds fit the small farm definition and they accounted for 65% of the cows. A little farther south and west in Cayuga County

(47th) 77% of the herds were less than 100 cows and they included 36% of the cows. Farther west in Wyoming County (28th nationally) 56% of the herds fit this small farm definition and they housed about 20% of the cows.

These numbers have no doubt changed since 1997, given the trend in herd sizes. Still, it's safe to say that small dairy farms and the people who manage them are critically important to NY's dairy sector. They're also vital to the many communities across the state that depend on farming, dairy manufacturing and related businesses for at least part of their economic well-being, their social infrastructures and their environmental amenities.

KEYS TO SMALL DAIRY SUCCESS

In 2001, we surveyed the operators and families of 54 small dairy farms that were seen as "successful" by other farmers and by the people who work with them. Cornell's Small Farm Task group also held focus group discussions with small dairy operators across NYS. We asked these farmers what they felt was most important to their success. Here is some of what they told us:

- Keep a positive attitude about farming as an occupation and about dairying in NYS.
- Decide what success means for you, your family, and your farm. What's the balance of lifestyle, production and profit?
- Know where you are going and how you'll get there. Successful small farm operators strategize and make plans. They have clear personal/family goals, and a plan for how the dairy farm will contribute to achieving those goals. They mesh their personal/family plans with those of their farm businesses.
- Make changes - business and lifestyle. Dairy farming is changing. Successful farmers plan for change and act accordingly, based on what is best for them, their fami-



Small farms are still the backbone of NY's dairy industry.

So we say... the heck with definitions. If the shoe fits, wear it! If you think of your farm as a smaller farm, and if you like what you read in Small Farm Quarterly, then we'll know we're on target!

IN THIS ISSUE...

Providing information you can apply to help achieve your goals is one objective of Small Farm Quarterly. Whether that information comes from other farmers, extension educators, researchers, or anyone else, our goal is to make it interesting, practical - and sometimes fun! In our premier issue you'll find articles on a wide range of farm and farm family topics, profiles of successful small farms, small farm jokes and stories, and much more...

Home and Family. The family remains the heart of most small farms. Talking about small farms without talking about families would be like studying the night sky and ignoring the stars! In this issue you can learn about conducting family meetings, and how to keep kids safe on the farm. Read about how one family's home garden saves them thousands of dollars a year on groceries. Check out "Crossroads," our farm family and personal advice column, and send us a question or a comment about your experience as a farming family. And if you want a good laugh, check out Brandt Ainsworth's tale of horse-drawn disaster, "A Farm Romance."

Production and Management. Technologies have their place — most all technologies are capable of solving a problem somewhere, for somebody. But good management has a place everywhere. See for yourself the benefits of careful management in "These Neighbors Live 52 Miles Apart," "Low-cost Milking Parlors," "A Beginning Farmer Success Story," and several other articles.

Young Farmers. Young people are our future, and we believe there's a bright future for young farmers in the Northeast. So, we're especially delighted to present the

Youth Page, written this time by 4-H Teen Ambassadors from Oswego County, NY. Be sure to share this section with your young readers, and encourage them to send us a letter or a drawing.

Farmer to Farmer. Small Farm Quarterly encourages farmers to share their perspectives and real life experiences. In this issue you'll find several farmer-authors, including Charlie Mowatt, who shares his experience combining meat production and woodlot improvement into one rewarding enterprise.

Inspiration. When you feel inspired you're more likely to recognize opportunities when they arise! When you're excited about what you're doing, your level of creativity increases, and your likelihood for success dramatically improves. Many farmers have been inspired by the writings of David Kline, and we're honored to have his contribution on community in this premier issue.

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

We encourage you to share your small farm experience through Small Farm Quarterly. Make it your magazine! Write to us about your own experiences and ideas, send us your jokes and stories, and we'll do our best to share them with other Small Farm Quarterly readers across the Northeast. And don't forget to let us know what you think of this premier edition of Small Farm Quarterly!

Write to:

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Wishing you a bountiful and thoroughly enjoyable harvest season....

**Bill Henning and Joanna Green,
for the Small Farm Quarterly Editorial Team**

lies and their businesses. There is no "recipe" or "cookie cutter". Each farm and each family does things a bit differently to achieve success. They stay "ahead of the curve."

- Dare to be different. Decide what is best for you, your family and your farm. It may not be what every one else is doing.
- Thoughtfully control costs—both in the farm business and in lifestyle choices. Know which costs you can reduce and which you can't—there are differences.
- Maintain an effective record system. Yes, successful small farmer operators keep records to make sure they are on track in achieving both their personal and business goals. Many record systems are simple, but they're workable and effective.
- Balance work (on- and off-farm), leisure and family time.
- Evaluate new technologies and practices carefully. They may just right for your small dairy. Then again, maybe they aren't.
- Combine farm and off-farm incomes to meet your needs and lifestyle choices.
- Diversify the dairy or specialize—there are examples of both in successful small dairy businesses.
- Pay attention to detail. Do the right thing at the right time in the right way.

Look for more information on operating a successful small dairy farm in this and future issues of *Small Farm Quarterly*. For more information on the Cornell Small Farms Task Group and the study mentioned above visit www.smallfarms.cornell.edu, or contact me, Dave Smith, at 607-255-7286 or rds4@cornell.edu.

Dave Smith is Director of Cornell's Small Farms Program.