

Conservation Corner article for June 22,2021

## Honest Conversations

*Dairy Farms are changing.*

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What if a dairy farm is doing everything right and it's still not profitable. Or the next generation doesn't have the same passion as the former generation but still wants to farm? Read on to find out how two area dairy farms may be pivoting to something different within the next decade.

### **Bosschers: sweet corn, dairy cows, and lots of cow chow**

Bosscher Dairy, just west of McBain, is a 4<sup>th</sup> generation dairy farm. Mike and Vickie Bosscher are the owners, and their son Tyler is the next generation farming with them. Bosschers milk a little over 200 cows and farm about 2000 acres. Dairy farms have had to diversify to stay profitable because milk prices aren't paying the bills. Mike stated that 50% of their income stream is the sale of cow feed to other dairy farms down state. Another unique feature of this farm is that the herdsman, Joe Kulhawick, and his wife Ruth own many of the cows on the farm, breeding for productivity and longevity using all the modern breeding methods and selection to make the herd better. Joe and Ruth oversee the cattle, but they are nearing retirement age. When they retire, the farm may not be milking cows, but instead the farm will be pivoting to raise dairy quality feed like they have been doing. Tyler isn't necessarily interested in working with cattle but enjoys the crop side of the farm.

Bosschers also raise sweet corn. It's actually one of Mike's favorite things to do. "Raising sweet corn is probably the last thing I'll give up doing as a farmer," Mike stated. He enjoys working with his family, who help harvest and get the sweet corn to the stands or to the farmer's market. It's a lot of work, but it brings the family together and people have come to expect their excellent corn.

The farm uses all the tools in the toolbox to be profitable as a dairy farm. They are using precision farming tools for crops to put down the right amount of seed, fertilizer, and pesticides. They maximize some fields with irrigation. Only run the irrigation when it's needed. Use all their manure to reduce fertilizer costs. All of that efficiency has come as a necessity to keep costs down.

### **Many Blessings- future chicken farm?**

Many Blessings Dairy a few miles north of Bosschers, another 4<sup>th</sup> generation farm, is a larger farm with more cows and acres raising primarily corn and alfalfa for chopped feed made into silage for the cows. Ken and Brenda DeZeeuw are the owners with their 4 sons and daughter working on the farm. DeZeeuw's have a similar issue with the next generation not necessarily wanting to be dairy farmers. The boys enjoy working on the farm, but don't have the same passion as their dad. The boys do have a small chicken venture that they are experimenting with

in raising pastured poultry for meat and eggs. That venture excites Ken just as much as his sons. It's a different type of agriculture using regenerative methods on a corner 3-acre sand piece. In the few years those chickens have been on this piece the soil has changed. It has gotten more productive by the feeding action of the chickens and their very rich manure.

Ken expounded on how maybe his farm could be more productive with less infrastructure if they did more pastured animals. Let the animals do the harvesting instead of hiring all the harvesting done and the same for spreading their own manure. There are of course other considerations, but this concept is really exciting for them.

Some background on Many Blessings Dairy: in 2007 the old parlor and cow barn were burnt in an accidental fire. Ken was left to find a place to milk his cows that remained and rebuild in the meantime. The community stepped up in many ways during the year that his farm was rebuilt. Between neighbors taking cows, milking, and feeding them; farmers from the greater McBain area helping harvest Ken's fields to take some pressure off him; and his father in law's construction crew moving at record speed to construct a new parlor and cow barns. All of those things have been ever present in Ken's mind since.

The fire also left the farm in some major debt even with insurance payments. Ken, like almost all farmers has gone to precision farming to be more efficient, to cut some fluff. He's gotten rid of most of the tillage and harvest equipment on his farm and has hired out a lot of the field work out to decrease his overhead. Yet, milk markets aren't and haven't been good for many years. This year alone with the increase of fuel prices, electricity, fertilizer prices, and now the increase in any feedstuffs not produced on the farm like grain from corn or soymeal has made dairy farming even harder. Funny thing is milk prices have not gone up much even when demand for milk and dairy products in grocery stores did during the last year with Covid. Dairy farming is tough and it's no wonder many of the next generation do not want to be dairy farmers.

Giving back to the community and honoring God is heavy on Ken's mind. It's one of the reasons why he and Brenda along with in-laws, Kregg and Toni Schierbeek started In Laws Farm, a several acre strawberry patch. They wanted a place for their kids to work and a commodity that people wanted and was lacking in the area. Now the patch is an annual event for families to get fresh fruit and experience a bit of agriculture for themselves.

### **What farmers want you to know about them**

When asked about what they wanted non-farmers to know about dairy farming. Mike responded with, "Dairy products are the safest, most tested product you'll ever get in the store." He also added, "This is really hard work. I wish people knew how much we care and how much work we do to stay in business." He's not wrong. Sixty-hour work weeks are slow weeks on a dairy farm. He's also not wrong about the safety of dairy products since they are tested at least 6 times for antibiotic residues and anything harmful before it's even bottled.

Ken states, "I wish people understood that a large farm doesn't mean a rich farm. I may be blessed in so many other ways, but wealth isn't one of them." Ken didn't say this to elicit sympathy; he's stating this as a fact. He is also concerned that the larger farms get the less the

community will be blessed by them. “The regulations are killing us and stymieing innovations and making it extremely hard for new farms to gain traction.”

Dairy farming in Missaukee County may look different in a decade. Farms come and go but farming of some sort will remain on these farms and others that look to diversify or to completely change their farming style.

*A huge thank you to Mike Bosscher and Ken DeZeeuw for honestly sharing with me what weighs heavy on their minds and allowing me to tell their stories. It’s an honor and a privilege to interview and share with others what you’ve told to me.- Jodi DeHate*

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Mike Bosscher, owner of Bosscher Dairy  
Photo Credit- Jodi DeHate



Cows at Many Blessings being milked  
Photo Credit-Jodi DeHate



Fitbit on cow’s ankle at Many Blessings  
Photo credit-Jodi DeHate



In Law Strawberry Patch- L-R

Toni Schierbeek – manager/owner, Taylor Cubitts- employee, Anne Thomas & Nicci LaChance- picked strawberries that morning.

Photo credit-Jodi DeHate



Pastured poultry

Photo credit- Jodi DeHate