

Building the dairy of the future

By Seth Nidever

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HANFORD - If you want a glimpse into the future of local dairy farming, look no further than Brian Medeiros.

The 23-year-old recent graduate of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is pursuing a vision of a dairy that pursues social and environmental sustainability alongside the requirement of making a profit.

It's a departure from the old days, where everybody milked their cows, minded their own business and didn't think too much about the outside world.

Now the outside world - and a world of dairy product consumers - is just a mouse click or a finger touch away from information about how milk is produced. The bigger picture, the interconnectedness of things, comes into focus. Increasingly, consumers care how employees are treated, how businesses approach their responsibility to the environment, how products are made.

Medeiros comes across as being thoughtful, involved, interested in Medeiros & Son Dairy not just as another way to make money, but also as a way to provide quality milk that his family, his workers' families and families around the world are going to consume in one way or another.

"As a farmer, we're looking at it as, who do you touch? Who are you affecting?" Medeiros said. "You're making something your kids drink. We want to do the most wholesome work we can."

Medeiros has gained a pretty high profile for a guy just running a dairy with his parents at the corner of 14th and Kent avenues southwest of Hanford. In October, he was one of two dairy farmers to speak at the World Dairy Summit in Parma, Italy.

As part of a panel addressing international efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the industry, Medeiros shared his family's approach to sustainability on their farm. They've

implemented environmentally sustainable efforts from the farm's start in 1994, including water recycling and composting.

Since returning to the farm after graduating from college, Medeiros has helped upgrade existing equipment with technology, including feed-management software and Global Positioning Systems on tractors to improve efficiency.

"Brian's story as a dairy producer illustrates the ongoing efforts occurring on farms across the U.S. and internationally," said Erin Fitzgerald, senior vice president of sustainability for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy. "His commitment to sustainability is a great example for producers worldwide. His story, like many others, helps to showcase the dairy sector's progress [toward] a more sustainable dairy industry."

In the word "sustainability," Medeiros sees a three-pronged meaning - economic, social and environmental.

It turns out that in most cases, sustainability practices have helped saved his dairy money. That's obviously important, but saving money is not the only motivation. Medeiros is pursuing a broader vision for dairies that includes a sustained commitment to minimizing impacts on others.

A big impact recently highlighted by a University of California, Davis study is nitrate contamination of groundwater. It's a problem in many disadvantaged communities in the San Joaquin Valley. According to the study, one of the primary contributors are farm fertilizer and dairies.

To address the problem, the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board requires dairies to create a nutrient-management plan to apply just the right amount of manure to crops so that most of the nitrates are absorbed by the plants.

Medeiros is taking his responsibility seriously. Having GPS devices on tractors allows for exact mapping of which areas of a field need what amount of fertilizer.

Next year, he'll take it a step further by implementing a variable rate applicator tied to the GPS mapping system to further fine-tune the amount of fertilizer spread onto fields.

Medeiros, like other dairy farmers, puts a premium on recycling. Water is reused. Manure goes onto fields to grow crops that are fed to cows.

But he's kicked it up a notch. He's worked hard to reuse water four or five times before it evaporates in the manure lagoon.

"It's doing more with less, or at least the same with less," he said.

The social aspect of running a dairy business also figures heavily. It's not just that Medeiros is thinking about the kids drinking his milk with their breakfast cereal. He's also thinking about his

workers. Are they paid enough to support their families? Is he making their work as easy and painless as possible? Do they understand the significance of producing food for others?

This attitude is consistent with some consumer movements that have tried to find out more about how workers are treated in the industries that make the products Americans consume.

Little changes can make a big difference. Take the GPS tractors. Without them, workers became exhausting trying to keep a tractor in a straight line, Medeiros said. It's the same story with the updated milking equipment he recently had installed. It's not just more efficient. It makes life easier for the workers.

"The people have to be sustainable," he said. "I have to make sure that my employees have what they need to live, to care for their families."

It all adds up to a big-picture vision Medeiros hopes will keep his family, his employees' families and his consumers' families enjoying Medeiros milk for a long time to come.

"We want to be around for generations," he said.