

The Business of Making Milk

Florida's dairy farmers play a vital role in the state's economy and environment.



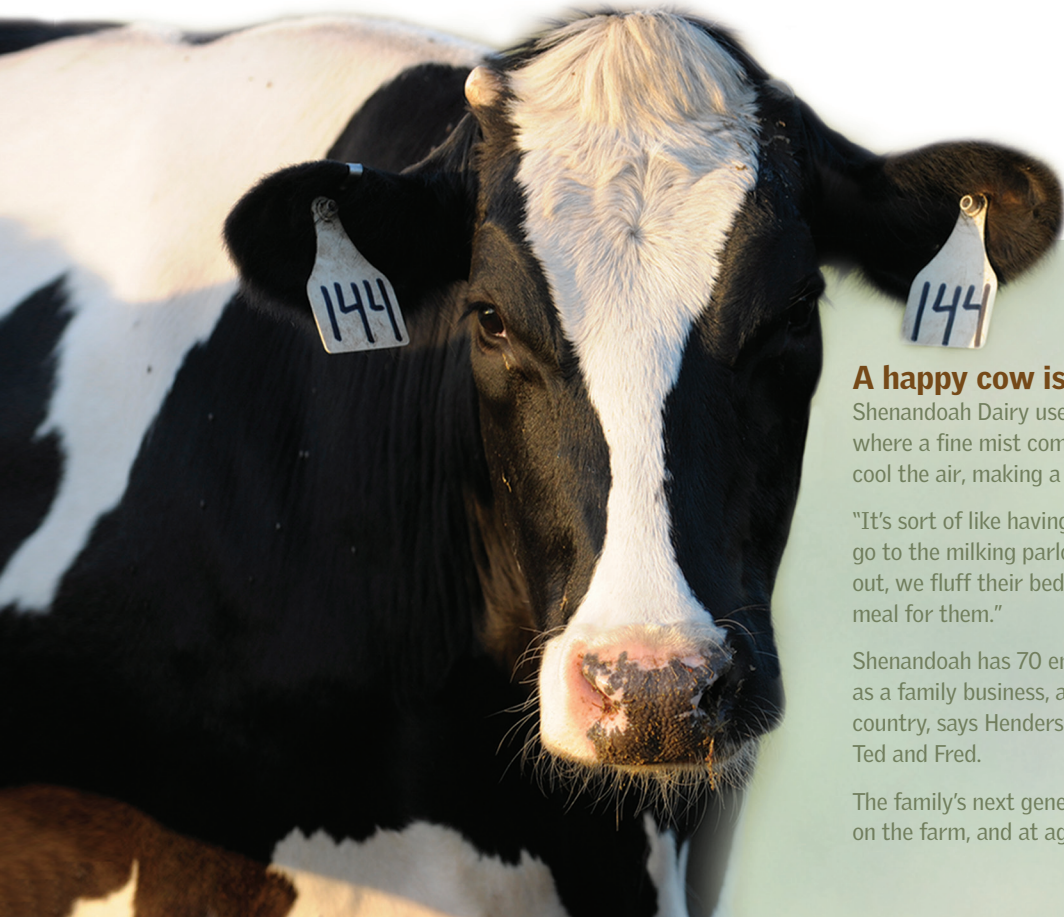
Ed Henderson

Ed Henderson and his brothers grew up in dairy farming, and their company's 100-year business plan calls for their children to carry on the family tradition. At their 2,400-acre Shenandoah Dairy in Live Oak, high-tech cooling systems keep the 3,000 cows comfortable between milking appointments on Florida's summer days.



Joe Wright

Joe Wright married a dairy farmer's daughter and traded in his profession as a Winter Park attorney. Today he is president of V&W Farms in Hardee County, west of Avon Park. He's taking the 1,300-acre farm "retro," putting its 1,300 cows back into the field, where they graze on 10 acres at a time.



A happy cow is a productive cow.

Shenandoah Dairy uses a tunnel-ventilation system in its barns, where a fine mist combines with a 12-mph wind from fans to cool the air, making a 95-degree day feel like it's in the mid-70s.

"It's sort of like having a cow Hilton," Ed Henderson says. "They go to the milking parlor twice a day to be milked. While they're out, we fluff their beds, clean their stalls and bring in a gourmet meal for them."

Shenandoah has 70 employees and is incorporated, but it's run as a family business, as are many farms in Florida and across the country, says Henderson, who operates the farm with brothers Ted and Fred.

The family's next generation also is involved. All the children help on the farm, and at age 14 they become eligible to buy stock in



Those two business leaders are key players in Florida's thriving dairy industry, which generates about \$439 million in milk sales annually from the state's more than 130 farms. Supplying about two-thirds of the milk consumed statewide, Florida dairies produced 2.13 billion pounds of milk in 2010, up from 2.08 billion pounds produced during 2009.

The dairy industry has stayed robust through the years, despite economic challenges and encroachment by residential and commercial development. All the while, farmers look for innovative ways to meet the sustainability needs of the future, while balancing company growth with a desire to be good neighbors and good stewards of the land.

For those in the industry who have seen it expand, contract and expand again in recent years, the ride has been fascinating. "The principles of dairy farming are not going to change dramatically," says John Miller, chief of the Bureau of Dairy Industry, Division of Food Safety, with the Florida Department

of Agriculture and Consumer Services. "You have to have good feed for your cattle, ensure a safe supply of milk and get a great-tasting product to market. That's never going to change."

What is changing, he and others in the industry say, is how the dairymen are bringing innovation to the farms.

Research and innovation

The trend of choosing between the high-tech farm and the grazing operation will continue to challenge those in the business, says Dr. Geoff Dahl, chair of the Department of Animal Sciences and a specialist in dairy production at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The research-and-development arm of the dairy industry, IFAS is developing new grasses that maintain their nutrients to help cows produce the maximum amount of milk.

Del Bottcher's Gainesville-based consulting firm, Soil and Water Technology Inc., has advised dairy farms

since 1986 on innovative ways to become more productive and environment-friendly. He helps the farms develop a complete nutrient management plan, looking at layout and size of paddocks, the number of cows that can be sustained, how much manure is being generated, how much grass is being consumed, and how the farm is meeting water quality requirements.

He has a front-row seat in helping develop tomorrow's innovations in dairy farming. Among them, industry watchers say: mobile milking facilities that go where the cows are grazing; methane digesters that turn manure into energy; and improved technologies to eliminate odors and groundwater contaminants from manure.

"The stumbling block is the initial expense," says Miller, with the state Bureau of Dairy Industry. "In other areas, these kinds of things are being done on large dairy farms. As the technology gets more proven, we'll see them happen in Florida."

the company and attend board meetings. Henderson says he hopes that "some of them, once they get out of school, will come back and help run the farm. It's real important to plan for the next generation. This is how we'll sustain our business in the future. I only hope I can do as well by my children as my father has done by me."

V&W Dairy moved its cows out of the barns and into the fields about two years ago, partly because of the increasing cost of feed. Corn prices have increased from \$2.25 a bushel to \$7 in the past decade, with as much as 50 percent of the nation's corn crop this year expected to go to producing ethanol to fuel vehicles.

"Government policy has changed the rules," Joe Wright says. "We still feed some grain, but we're pushing grass. We don't get as much milk per cow this way, but it costs less and conserves energy because we're using less electricity with them out of the barns."

Cutting the fields into 10-acre paddocks has another benefit, he says: It's easier to manage the animals' waste, which needed to be processed and spread out over the fields. Today the cows distribute the waste naturally, fertilizing the grass on their own. Perennial grasses keep the cows fed for nine or 10 months a year, and the farm harvests hay and rye grass for feed in the winter.



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