

Safety Watch: Dairy promotes safety from farm to table

By Brandi Janssen

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Connections between Dan and Debbie Takes' eastern Iowa dairy farm and their creamery business extend to safety practices.

Photo courtesy Dan and Debbie's Creamery

Although dairy farmers are struggling in many parts of the country, business is booming at one dairy operation in eastern Iowa.

Dan and Debbie Takes of Takes Family Farm started milking in 1997 when they transitioned from a beef operation. Recently I talked with their daughter, Josie.

She said six bankers turned them down when they tried to get funding to build a milking facility on their farm. They persevered: The seventh banker was willing to give them a loan. They started their new dairy with just 30 heifers; now they milk 150 head twice each day.

It wasn't long before they had other enterprises in mind. The family was interested in adding a creamery to process their milk into sellable products, but during the first 10 years of milking, their six children were young and life was hectic.

Finally, in 2013, they purchased a building in downtown Ely, Iowa, renovating it between the morning and evening milking times. In 2016, Dan and Debbie's Creamery opened, selling fresh cheese curds, bottled milk and ice cream in their first year.

Josie, who manages all of the creamery operations and sales and marketing, pointed out that farmers often live "day to day," responding to unpredictable changes in the weather and marketing. But the creamery requires the family to have a different "business mindset" and plan farther ahead to manage their inventory.

The connections between the farm and the creamery extend to safety practices. Josie explained that in a food-processing business, cleanliness and food safety are extremely important. They use chemical cleaners for their equipment that can be hazardous to their workers.



Photo courtesy Dan and Debbie's Creamery

The family deliberately selected a chemical vendor that also provided safety resources

for the creamery employees. These include signs, standard operating procedures and detailed instructions on how to use the products safely. This safety mindset has carried over to the farm, and now the family also looks for equipment and seed vendors who will also provide safety resources for the business.

Josie notes, “Many companies provide these resources to their customers when you buy their product, but people might not know that.”

For the Takes family, who didn’t have a large budget for safety materials and training, using their vendors as a resource has filled an important gap.

Ensuring a safe working environment is critical to the family’s business success. Parents Dan and Debbie, as well as four of their six children, are currently involved in the management of the creamery and farm. Dan and Debbie and son Tyler are full time on the farm, though Debbie comes to the creamery to make ice cream between milking times. Dustin is a firefighter in Cedar Rapids, but also manages the production facility and helps with farm work. Another son, Riley, drives distribution routes to restaurants and business.

Josie says, “We all really count on each other, and two business would suffer if anyone got hurt.”

Josie also points out that because the family handles each gallon of milk from the cow to the final point of sale, their farm and business practices are visible to their customers. They are highly attentive to food and employee safety because they sell their products to their neighbors and at retailers in their area. Unsafe working conditions would be damaging for their business in their small community.

The Takes family’s commitment to safety even extends beyond the farm. In their monthly newsletters to their regular customers, Josie always includes a note about roadway safety in the spring and fall. She realizes that many of their customers are not from farm backgrounds and may be impatient with slow-moving vehicles.

The Takes family has plans for future expansions, including new products that will make use of the skim milk leftover after they make butter and ice cream.

They also want to get their customers more familiar with the dairy side of the business. They already offer tours of the creamery, with viewing windows over the production area so that you can watch as they make ice cream and cheese. Next, they plan to offer tours of the milking operation.

Josie points out how that plan has made them again rethink safety on the farm. For example, they need to fence off a manure pit and make some upgrades before they can invite the public to the farm.



Photo courtesy Dan and Debbie's Creamery

Josie says they are also thinking about how to reinforce to visitors that it is a working farm — with moving equipment and large livestock. She knows that people who haven't been around farming may be unaware of the hazards.

She says, “We want them to experience the farm, but we want to make sure that no one ever gets hurt.”

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