



For Immediate Release – JUNE 7, 2012
Contact: Kirsten Voinis, (512) 922-7141 or
kvoinis@kvoinis.com

During National Dairy Month, a second generation Texas dairyman weighs leaving the business

By John Traweek
Jam-Dot Dairy

National Dairy Month normally is a time for myself and other dairy families to be thankful for the opportunity to work in God's great outdoors at the honorable profession of feeding our fellow Texans.

But this June, dairying is more sour than sweet for the Traweeks and a growing number of our fellow dairy farmers who are struggling to hang on to farms, many built by generations of hard work and financial investment. Farmers often face tough times, but the last few years have been more brutal than even most old-timers can remember.

My family has been dairying in Central Texas' Erath County since the 1950s. My dad, James, began farming near Purvis, and now he, my brother Ricky and I operate the Jam-Dot Dairy with him outside Lingleville. We are currently milking 500 cows on 750 acres, about half the number of cows and acres we had two years ago.

We're becoming a rare breed. Half the farms operating a decade ago in Central Texas and in our state have since shuttered their milking parlors. Now just more than 500 dairy farms in Texas produce milk to feed a growing population.

Farms – and families – have fallen victim in recent years to rock bottom farm-level milk prices, soaring feed and fuel costs, record drought, shrinking credit lines, growing costs of keeping animals healthy, meeting increasingly stringent environmental regulations and hiring farm labor. It costs us more money to milk a cow than we are getting paid for the milk. Dairy farmers are caught in a downward economic storm.

Will my family and the Jam-Dot Dairy be the next to go under? We ask ourselves this almost daily. So do many of our friends and neighbors.

We need help and solutions. In Central Texas, producers, agribusinesses and others in the community have started meeting to determine what we can do, as a group, to preserve the local dairy industry and nearby businesses that depend on it for their survival. Hopefully we can find some answers.

Bank loans are no longer an option to money woes. There's no equity in farms that can't guarantee repayment or are already defaulting on existing loans. These local bankers are our friends; they realize how much we contribute to the local economy and community. But stricter industry lending rules give them no choice. Deals based on personal relationships and handshakes are no more. Now decisions are based solely on cash flow and other financial numbers.

Land that farmers worked long and hard to own, free and clear, is now encumbered by loans, in danger of default and difficult – if not impossible – to sell. Retirement is not an option, but neither is staying in the dairy industry.

We're not only losing farms, we're losing generations of experience and knowledge. And, with little incentive for young people to get into the business, the future of the industry is in danger.

I'm sad to say that I'm certainly not encouraging my son to become a third generation dairy farmer. It's an honorable profession, but it just doesn't work, financially.

What, then, does the future hold for the Jam-Dot Dairy? I'm trying to figure out how our family can gracefully exit the business. Our farm continues to lose equity. Thankfully, our family was smart enough to diversify and has other business interests that are keeping the family dairy going.

The smartest thing to do would be to walk away. That would kill my dad, even though in the last five years he's seen everything he's worked for crumble to nothing. It's a hard decision to make. Unfortunately, we're not the only family being forced to make it.

John Traweek and his family own the Jam-Dot Dairy outside of Lingleville, Texas, where they milk 500 cows on 750 acres. He is a member of the Texas Association of Dairymen (www.milk4texas.org), first vice president on the Dairy MAX Board of Directors and member of the TriCounty Agribusiness Association Board of Directors.

DIGITAL PHOTO OF THE AUTHOR ATTACHED.

Contact information (for verification only):

John Traweek
Jam-Dot Dairy
15523 W FM 8
Stephenville, TX 76401-8650
(254) 967-0271
legendscc@embarqmail.com

or

Kirsten Voinis
Media consultant, Texas Association of Dairymen
P.O. Box 12722
Austin, TX 78711
(512) 922-7141
kvoinis@kvoinis.com