

## **It's Family First on Wisconsin Farms**

Hard-working families across this state rise every day ahead of the sun to begin their day. Most days, aside perhaps from the long-light days of summer, those days don't end until after dark. The hours in between are spent working to generate an income to support their family...or families. For farmers, those long working hours are focused almost exclusively on producing the food and fiber that feeds not only the consumers within this state, but around the world.

In nearly every instance, the people who work on our farms are doing so alongside a spouse, child, father, brother, sister or other family members—99 percent of the farms in Wisconsin are family farms. That includes everything from the small farm selling produce through a local market or cooperative to the largest dairy, crop or livestock farm in the state.

While the technologies utilized to grow food on Wisconsin farms change dramatically with each passing decade, one fact remains solid and crystal clear—farms in Wisconsin are family farms, not factory farms.

As time goes by, farms get passed from one generation to the next in a manner that is just like any other family-owned business in the state. And as each generation prepares to enter the business, difficult questions are asked. Can the income from the business support more than one family? What type of lifestyle does the incoming generation want? How can the business be transferred without burdening the next generation with exorbitant debt? This transition is embarked upon with the same level of thoughtfulness, planning, and excitement whether you are growing cranberries or selling automobiles.

Just like other businesses, this transition is one of the primary reasons why farms in Wisconsin have increased in size over time. Often the farm must expand—more animals, more acreage – in order to establish enough family income to keep the business viable. In the case of dairy operations that are inherently labor intensive, larger farms require more labor. Getting more cows milked in a timely fashion requires more technology, more jobs, and more people.

As more family members come on board, farms are incorporated, mostly for tax and liability reasons. So it's true that "corporations" own most of the farms in Wisconsin – both large and small. But closer examination finds that those farm corporations are truly owned and run by Wisconsin families.

But even if families run larger farms, consumers can't relate to what goes on every day on these farms. While research shows that consumers trust farmers, it also shows that consumers aren't sure that what happens today in production agriculture is actually farming. That's because most consumers are at least two generations removed from any family connection to farming. So just as farmers probably don't have a real understanding of what happens inside a corporate office

or manufacturing plant, there is no real basis for consumers to understand what happens every day on a farm.

Wisconsin's farmers have earned this trust by dedicating their lives to producing nutritious, healthy, and safe food products so all consumers can feel comfortable making food choices for their families. Earning consumer trust means:

1. Our family farmers have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in protecting the land and water. Aside from the fact land is the largest capital asset passed to the next generation; farmers have an inherent nature to be proper land stewards. It's well understood that if you take care of the land, the land will take care of you.
2. Our family farmers take care of their animals. Even on operations that may include several thousand animals, our farmers and veterinarians make sure that processes and procedures are in place to ensure that each individual animal is:
  - a. cared for with the utmost respect
  - b. offered a living environment that optimizes cow comfort and protection from harsh external weather
  - c. provided total access to high quality food and clean water
  - d. enrolled in a health care program – both preventative and treatment
3. Our family farmers willingly comply with Wisconsin's environmental regulations, and have done so under the leadership of local and state government. For example, our state agencies, like the DNR and DATCP, ensure that as farms get larger, the level of regulation grows along with the new farm technology. That's why it is true that large farms are more heavily regulated than any other industry in the state, and that farmers must go through a lengthy and cumbersome permitting process in order to grow. It's also true that there are producer organizations, like the Dairy Business Association and others, working with regulatory agencies to ensure that the regulations are fair for all parties, and that the permitting process is made as efficient as possible.

Of the more than 70,000 family farms in Wisconsin, less than 200 are large enough to be classified as concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFO's. It's these farms that have come under public scrutiny. It's difficult for consumers to relate to these as family farms because they usually don't have the traditional red barns and silos they often remember from their youth. Or the technology used on the farm has advanced to the point that modern farming no longer resembles the classic farm images from times gone by.

But if you take a moment for a closer look, behind each of those operations is a family, or families, that are caring for animals with compassion and caring for the land with reverence. They are following regulations to advance environmental stewardship. They are preparing the farm so that the next generation's family can continue...providing food for the people of Wisconsin and the rest of the world.