

If I'm Not Going to be a Dairy Farmer any More, What Am I Going to do?

Maurice Eastridge, Professor and Extension Dairy Specialist, Department of Animal Sciences

Whether due to financial hardship, physical exhaustion, injury, or "I just feel now is the time to change what I do", you may be facing the decision of what to do after discontinuing in dairy farming. For most, this is a gut-wrenching decision. You likely grew up on a dairy farm, and dairy farming is all you ever wanted to do – or you thought it was all you knew how to do. You like being around cows and raising a family on the farm. Maybe the farm has been passed down through several generations, and if the cows go, you are struggling with, "Can we keep the land?" There are financial issues, the impact on family, the emotional nature of weathering this change, and the degree of satisfaction with your decisions that need to be considered.

Dealing with these issues in life is not easy, but neither is dairy farming, and it is often said that farmers are "resilient people". Making these decisions about your future and that of your family's are affected by how much time you can take to make the transition – Can you gradually make the transition to a new occupation or must it be done abruptly for financial reasons or health complications? The amount of anxiety present during the transition will depend on your life-situation and how you handle stress. Fear can paralyze, so the famous saying of Franklin D. Roosevelt, "We have nothing to fear except fear itself", should be a constant reflection in situations of career change.

You may be saying to yourself that "making this occupational change is going to be stressful", and this is most likely true. For some families, there may be no option but to exit dairy farming, while others may find less stress in transitioning to a new career than in trying to keep the dairy farm operating. The amount of stress experienced by a family will be affected by the financial implications and how the family handles stress and communication. This communication is very important among all family members but especially between the spouses.

Career change can certainly be stressful on marriages, and some issues faced by your spouse may include:

- Having feelings of insecurity,
- Financial concerns related to reduced financial income during the transition or with a new job,
- Not feeling sufficiently included in the career-change decision,
- Juggling time demands and childcare, and
- Stress of watching a partner go through emotional ups and downs.

Thorough discussion with children may still result in their uncertainty of the consequences of the decisions, and they may blame themselves for the changes. Behavioral changes by children during such times require immediate attention.

Ponder the thought, "What do I do now"? The answer to this will be affected by many aspects, including:

- What do you want to accomplish yet in your life?
- What are the short and long-term goals for you and your family, and how difficult is it to obtain these goals?
- Are your aspirations (dreams) obtainable or unlikely, unless "the stars align themselves just right"?
- How much risk is associated with the career change you are considering? If the risk is high, can you afford a time or money downfall? Are you really a risk seeker, or do you avoid high risk situations?

In this quest, you will need to determine "How closely aligned with agriculture, or the dairy industry, do I want my new occupation?" Often the answer is that "I want to continue to work in agriculture." Then, the nagging drive to be self-employed must be addressed. Being self-employed may be the best option for doing contract work. Many companies prefer contract work so they do not have to pay benefits, and changes in workforce are more flexible.



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Perhaps being self-employed may be the worst case for you if fringe benefits are important (e.g., health insurance not available through spouse's job) and you do not have a client base to draw upon. During difficult economic conditions, establishing a client base can be a challenge and the risk may be too high. When exploring self-employment, reflect on these questions:

- How flexible are you, and how comfortable are you with uncertainty?
- How high are your fixed expenses, and what kind of financial safety net and resources does your household have?
- Is the market you plan to enter growing over the long term?
- Who will be your competitors, and what will be your competitive advantage?
- Are you self-motivated and self-disciplined?
- How will you market the business?

Of course, many agricultural companies may not be hiring at the present time due to the economy, but some of them are seeking to fill key positions, and they are always looking for experience. Not sure what you can do? Think about all of the skills you have developed as a dairy farmer. Most dairy farmers have a multitude of things at which they are quite skilled, whether it is being a carpenter, welder, electrician, engineer, accountant, agronomist, nutritionist, turf manager, inseminator, crop nutrient specialist, and the list goes on. In addition, dairy farmers have a large established network of relationships and generally have a strong work ethic. These positive attributes can work to your advantage:

- Make a list of skills in consultation with your family, whether it be mechanical or business in nature. Which of these skills do you really enjoy? What are some options for putting these skills to work elsewhere?
- Are you a "people person" (extrovert)? If so, then possibly a job in agricultural sales may be a fit for you.
- Do you have the land base and equipment to become a crop farmer? Would you grow grain crops, or is there a market for forage crops in your area?
- What networks have you established over the years? Now is the time to use these networks to locate a new job or seek advice on possible options. Also, don't forget about the family network for job connections. Who you know and timing ARE two important aspects of obtaining a job.
- "Since I know a lot of dairy farmers and I have the land and facilities, what about raising heifers?" If you struggled with raising heifers on your farm, this is not an advisable path.
- Are you a very organized person? If so, then maybe your skills are waiting to be used in a business or local community organization.
- Are you analytical in nature, including using numerical analyses? Then, a position in banking, accounting, or tax preparation may be a fit for you.

- Do you have the resources (time and financial) to seek a new career, and does the occupation you want to pursue require a degree or additional training?

Keep in mind that some employment services may be helpful, including job recruiters, community-based job services, agencies that provide temporary services, and state agencies that focus on matching up people's skills with available jobs. Also, contacting the local county Extension educator for suggestions is advisable.

You don't have to have all of the answers to start down a new career path; you just have to have the major ones addressed. Then, pay attention to significant coincidences – serendipity events do happen which can lead you further in the direction you are heading or may provide an opportunity to head in some other direction. Mangelsdorf (2009) quotes in her book listed below, "When there's a 'pregnant pause' in your life by transition, it's good to try to accept the discomfort and make friends with it. This takes patience and trust in yourself." This 'pregnant pause' also involves having time to do some serious thinking. Do not just keep busy to avoid making decisions. This change will likely be less stressful when small steps can be taken, and when you discuss the changes with people you trust, those who are impacted by your decisions, and those who have had similar life experiences.

Bottom Line: Changing careers can be a source of frustration, disappointment, fear and stress. However, remaining in dairy farming may not be an option for you and your family, or the stress in trying to stay in the dairy business may be more intense than the stress of making a career change. You need to identify your transferable skills, strengths, and limitations, and use the network of relationships you already have established. For many, your new career will align with agriculture or with a passion for serving that you have developed within the community. I am often reminded of a saying, "You have only failed when you have failed to try." Give it your best. Be a survivor and reflect on the blessings in life!



Reference

Mangelsdorf, M.E. 2009. *Strategies for Successful Career Change: Finding your best next work life*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley.

Additional DIBS are available on-line at <http://dairy.osu.edu>.

Published by OSUE Dairy Working Group, a collaboration of OSU Extension Educators and Specialists.

Factsheet originally published in September 2009, DIBS # 25-09

Contact author at: Maurice Eastridge, Department of Animal Sciences,
(614) 688-3059, eastridge.1@osu.edu

The College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its academic and research departments including, Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC), Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) and Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to age, ancestry, color, disability, gender identity or expression, genetic information, HIV/AIDS status, military status, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Bruce McPherson, Ph.D., Vice President for Agricultural Administration & Dean

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing, please contact the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences using your preferred communication (e-mail, relay services, or video relay services). Phone 1-800-750-0750 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. EST Monday through Friday. Inform the operator to dial 614-292-6891.

Copyright © 2014, The Ohio State University