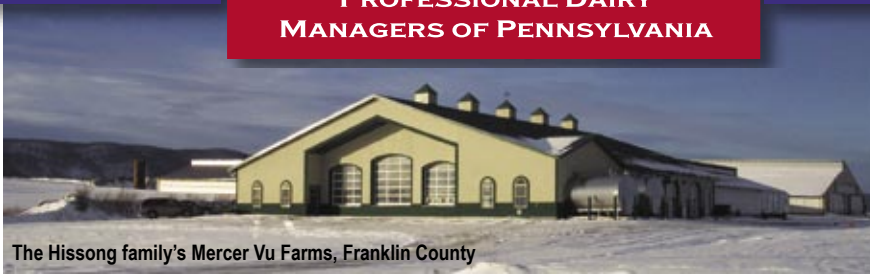


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The Hissong family's Mercer Vu Farms, Franklin County



Meet PDMP's new president Rod Hissong

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

MERCERSBURG, Pa.—Much has changed since Rod Hissong's grandparents, Glenn and Mae, started dairying with seven cows on a rented farm after Glenn returned from World War II. By 1949 they had purchased what is today the home farm. By the mid-1960s, they had purchased a neighboring farm and were milking 60 cows.

In the early 1970s, the dairy grew to 100-120 cows and by 1980, Rod's parents, Ron and Judy, had bought out the partnership and purchased another farm. That's pretty much the way it stayed until the early 1990s.

"I was always involved on the farm, growing up, but I also had the opportunity to do some other things and develop other interests," Rod recalls. In high school he wasn't entirely sure which direction he would go. But by his sophomore year in college, he knew he wanted to return to the dairy farm.

It was during his years at Penn State that he attended his first PDMP meetings. On December 5th, Rod was elected president of the organization for 2009. He previously served four years as vice-president.

After graduating from Penn State in 1998 with a degree in dairy and animal science, Rod joined his family's then 240-cow Mercer Vu Farms as a full-time employee. Rod's brother, Rick, had graduated earlier from Penn State in ag mechanization.

"When my brother came home, he got the herd up to date. It was exciting to see that, and it opened my eyes," Rod recalls.

By the year 2000, the family dairy had incorporated, and Rod and Rick were realizing the importance of business planning. They went to three times a day milking, and Rod found he enjoyed not only working with the cows, but also managing the growing labor force.

Through the Pennsylvania Dairy Stakeholders Business Planning Assistance Program, the Hissongs received a grant for business planning. They looked at expanding to 500 or 600 cows, but those numbers would not cash flow, so they decided to expand to about 900 cows.

"We started planning for that in 1999 to 2000, but we didn't break ground until 2002. It took more than a year to get our CAFO permit," Rod explains, adding that their farm is close to the town of Mercersburg and the nearby prep school academy. "That's when we recognized we needed to do some work with community relations, and we started our website (www.mercervufarms.com)."

Today, the farm's website attracts school-teachers and others who have the opportunity to do a "virtual tour" of a cow's day. On the website "visitors can follow the cow through her day to see what happens on a modern farm," Rod explains. "We wanted to show people what happens on a modern dairy, that we keep our cows productive and comfortable with a nice place to live."

The website has a lot of pictures, and Rod put it together, himself, using Microsoft publisher.

As time went on, the Hissongs continued to add facilities and cows. Today they have 1600 mature cows with 1400 going through the parlor. Five years ago they also went back to raising their own heifers. They crop 1600 acres and hire a custom harvester just for the chopping.

A big plus for comfort is the sand-bedded freestalls. Mercer Vu's manure management system includes sand separation and manure composting. "We flush the barns, separate the sand, and then separate the manure solids, which then go through the press to dry them

down," says Rod. "Some of the dry solids get used as bedding in the dry cow and heifer barns, the rest are composted. We started doing this a year ago, and it has worked out very well with our cropping enterprise."

Rod figures the value of the raw manure was worth about \$10-12 per ton to their cropping operation. But after composting, the value is \$50 to \$60 per ton. Just a couple weeks ago he sold some for \$100 per ton.

"With the composted manure solids, we're saving a lot on fertilizer," he reports. "This has eliminated most of our fertilizer needs, and once in a while we get a few people from the community wanting to buy some."

The Hissongs also haul their own milk, about 16 loads per week, with two tankers.

Rod's wife Amy grew up on a dairy farm and also attended Penn State. They have a son, Carter, just six months old.



As a long time member of PDMP, Rod is enthusiastic about the many aspects of this producer-led organization but most of all, he loves the meetings.

"It's good to be part of an organization that is involved in what's going on around us and at the table speaking up for producers," says Rod. "But what I really love are the meetings. The educational part has really helped us, and I always look forward to the interaction, even more so in a year when things are tough. It's like a support group. I look forward to talking to people who are positive about the dairy business."

"The world will pass us by if we are not involved... If we can collectively work together, we can speak with a large enough voice to be heard. We won't be able to thrive in the next upturn, let alone survive the next downturn, unless we work together to effectively navigate whatever climate we find ourselves in."

Rod Hissong, Mercer Vu Farms

A unified voice for progressive-minded dairymen

By ROD HISSONG
PDMP President

It is with great pleasure and honor that I continue my service to the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP) as its next president. Past leaders have set a high standard of service, which I hope to maintain.

My family's dairy has been a member of PDMP for the last 10 years, and I have been on the PDMP board of directors for the last five. Our membership to PDMP has been invaluable to us and is why I chose to serve in the leadership. The small membership fee that we pay has had big returns for our dairy.

From the networking with other like-minded dairymen, to the educational meetings, to the work that PDMP does advocating for the needs of progressive dairymen, this organization serves our dairy well beyond the monetary investment that we make as members.

PDMP exists to serve the needs of progressive-minded dairymen. One of the misconceptions about PDMP is that when we say "progressive," we mean "big." While many members of PDMP operate larger dairies, we see the value that all dairies—large and small—have to the Pennsylvania dairy industry. We dairymen and women are a shrinking population. There is enough fragmentation going on in the dairy industry that we cannot afford to separate ourselves from large or small.

Progressive dairies, no matter how many cows they milk, are those that have positive attitudes, that enjoy the challenges of dairying, that strive to learn and grow through education and networking, and that realize dairying is a business and we must continually adapt and change to the business climate and work together.

Unlike the large mortgage houses or the automobile manufacturers, not a single one of us is big enough to NOT fail. Our bail out will not be coming. Our national and state policymakers are not going to listen to us as individuals,

but, if we can collectively work together, we can speak with a large enough voice to be heard.

So what issues has PDMP worked on and spoken out on as a unified voice? We have spoken out on the right to use technology on our dairies, milk labeling, immigration, CAFO permitting and regulation, and animal welfare, to name a few.

In 2009 we will have some new faces in Washington. It is too early to tell if that is good or bad for our industry, but one thing is for sure, there is no point in crying about it. Change is coming, and we need to be at the table. PDMP has worked hard to make sure we are at that table. Your membership guarantees that you will be at that table with us. We want and need your input. It's for your business and your future.

At our December PDMP board meeting, we narrowed down our educational meetings for 2009 to a few topics that will keep you ahead of the curve. The June meeting will focus on family relationships in the dairy business. The August meeting will be devoted to "greening" the dairy, from telling our story of environmental stewardship, to exploring the opportunities for renewable energy. In November, our meeting will tackle the subject of understanding your milk check and understanding the changing markets for our dairy products—how our products are marketed and how new world markets affect our milk prices.

These topics are exciting and will provide a wealth of knowledge that you can take home and apply to your dairy business.

In January we will also start planning the next exciting dairy tour with an anticipated destination of Mexico.

If you can't wait for all of that, I would encourage you to get started February 11 and 12 at the 2009 Pennsylvania Dairy Summit. We have an outstanding line-up of dairymen and experts that are sure to educate, enlighten and excite you about the dairy industry.

As we enter 2009, all of us in the dairy industry know that we are in for a battle. The coming year looks to be difficult for most of us—too high of costs and too low of milk price, a down economy, and all of the other issues that are being placed on our plates. It is a time when we all would like to stay home, take care of business, crawl in a hole and let the world pass us by.

That is the problem: The world will pass us by if we are not involved. Policymakers do not stop just because of a downturn in the dairy economy. They keep moving forward. When things do turn around, and we crawl out of our hole, the world may be different than when we went in. It may be a world where we can't compete, where we don't have access to the technologies or the labor, or have the opportunities to move our businesses in a direction to compete.

We won't be able to thrive in the next upturn, let alone survive the next downturn, unless we work together to effectively navigate whatever climate we find ourselves in.

Now, more than ever, even in a down dairy economy, PDMP is important and relevant. PDMP will help give you the tools and the help needed to insure the dairy world around you is a place where you will not just survive, but thrive, no matter what the conditions.

That is why I am a member of PDMP, and that is why I am excited to serve as the next president. The pay and the perks are hardly lavish. Come to think of it there are no pay and no perks, but it's the excitement of taking the issues that are before us and doing something about them. We have an opportunity to be part of the decisions that affect our own destiny and our own successes or failures, on our terms, and not letting someone else decide it for us.

In 2009 I ask you to join me as PDMP works to help its producers navigate through the difficult dairy climate.