

Dan Senestraro – Dairy 4

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Go East, young man, and grow up with the country.” Actually, that is the opposite of the original saying made famous by editor Horace Greeley, who told his readers to go west in 1865. But in 1994, one entrepreneur found that his path to growth was to go east, and that led him to rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dan Senestraro is the owner of Eastside Dairy in Stanton County, Kansas. Dan is the westernmost Kansan on the Board of Directors of the Dairy Farmers of America.

Dan grew up on a dairy farm in California. He went to veterinary school at the University of California at Davis. “I was determined not to be in the dairy business,” he said with a smile. He graduated in 1986. By 1989, he found himself in the dairy business again.

“I was in a partnership on 800 dairy cows in rented space in southern California,” Dan said. As California became more crowded and urbanized, Dan looked to relocate and grow.

Western Kansas was actively seeking to attract dairies, touting such advantages as dry climate, abundant feed, and a pro-agriculture state economy. In 1994, Dan moved to Kansas and became part of the dairy expansion.

Today, Dan and his partner Clayton Winger own and operate Eastside Dairy on the east side of Stanton County. They milk approximately 3,400 cows and have that many heifers being raised for future production, so they have roughly 7,000 total head of cows. Their heifers are custom raised up to four months of age. Each year they farm more than 800 acres of cropland in corn, sorghum and wheat.

“We're sustainable,” Dan said. “We have a closed loop system and we reuse all the waste water and nutrients. We catch every drop of runoff,” he said. For example, water that is used to clean off pens is captured and fed through the water pivots to irrigate crops.

“We do nutrient recycling,” Dan said. “We do export some manure to neighbors who grow corn and silage for us,” he said. “It's good business practice as well as environmentally sound,” he said.

In 2000, Dan got involved in the governance of the dairy industry. Dairy Farmers of America, the nation's largest dairy cooperative, is organized into several regions. All of Kansas was in the central region, but dairies in southwest Kansas were more similar to the ones in Texas and New Mexico so the regions were reorganized. Today in the DFA organization, Dan is chair of the southwest area, chair of the Global Trade Committee, and vice-chair of the overall organization's Board of Directors.

Dan has seen many changes through the years, involving trade and other factors. “Fifteen or twenty years ago, we exported maybe three to four percent (of our production),” he said. “Today, 17 to 18 percent of production on a solids

basis is being exported. We're moving more and more into world markets," he said.

The DFA organization has also grown and changed. For years, the DFA headquarters was in a leased building in Kansas City, Missouri. In 2017, DFA built a building in the Legends area of Kansas City, Kansas. "The Kansas people bent over backwards to help us," Dan said.

As milk production grew in southwest Kansas, opportunities grew for further processing. In September 2017, DFA opened a new milk processing plant in Garden City. "It handles four million pounds of milk a day," Dan said. The milk is converted to whole milk powder which goes into the export market.

"We've made lots of progress out here," Dan said. He serves on the city council and airport board at his rural community of Johnson City, population 1,495 people. Now, that's rural. "Everybody needs to be involved to make things work," he said.

"Go East, young man." That's the direction which Dan Senestraro took from California, and it has made it possible to grow the dairy industry. We commend Dan Senestraro, Clayton Winger, and all those involved with Eastside Dairy. Their move has enabled them to go and grow.

In coming weeks, we'll learn more about the growth of the dairy industry in western Kansas.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.