

Embracing the Consumer

2009 MMPA District 7 OYDC Brandon Falker

While farming on the outskirts of metro Detroit can be very challenging, Brandon Falker and his family have turned these challenges into opportunities to educate consumers about the dairy industry and farming in general.

“We try to educate the consumers as much as we can by bringing them on to the farm and showing them our dairy operation first-hand” Brandon says. “Milk is one of the most natural products there is and consumers need to see that dairy farmers take pride in what we do. Farming isn’t just what we do, it’s a way of life for us that we love.”

Brandon farms with his family

at Howardale Farms in Romeo, located about 40 miles north of Detroit. The area surrounding the farm is now mainly residential as a result of the now slowing housing boom.

The area we are in is so developed that it’s not really considered to be country any more,” Brandon says. “We have to pick certain times of day to go to the field because of the traffic—pretty much have to have field work done before 3 p.m. if we have to cross M-53.”

Brandon’s father, Mark, explains that where they need to cross M-53, there are five lanes of traffic with no stoplights. The traffic is so heavy that if they find themselves still farming on the opposite side of M-53 after 3 p.m., they will call someone to come pick them up in a car and will leave the tractor in the field until the next day.

With so many houses surrounding the farm, one might think the Falkers would have issues with neighbors who didn’t quite know what to expect when moving to the country—particularly the smell of manure.

“We have positive relations with the neighbors,” Brandon says. “If we respect them, they respect us. Most have been around for awhile and most realize that the

manure smell is an inconvenience for only a short time. They understand that we try our best to do what we can and they respect that.”

The Falkers began rotationally grazing their cows about 10 years ago after seeing how well it was working at a family member’s farm in the Upper Peninsula. They’ve continued grazing the cows because it helps them accumulate less manure and have noticed an overall improvement in herd health.

“There’s a subdivision nearby, though we haven’t had a lot of complaints,” Mark says. “They say they can only smell manure about six times a year. It’s the worst in the spring when we have to clean out the manure pit, but we make sure to work it in the ground right away. We try to be good neighbors and don’t spread manure before holidays. It’s not too difficult to do when you are small like we are.”

Community involvement also helps neighborly relations, say Mark and Brandon. Mark has been a township trustee for the past 11 years, serving on the planning commission for four years prior to that.

“I got involved in the planning commission because I wanted to make sure farming was represented,” Mark says.

He started out going to the meetings as an audience member and was later asked to serve as a commissioner. Following his time as a commissioner, he ran for and was elected as a township trustee.

“It is important to be present at these types of meetings so the board is aware of agriculture issues,” Mark says. “You don’t have to sit on the board to make people aware. You can do that from the audience, too.”



Top: Three generations of dairy farmers: Howard, Brandon and Mark Falker.

Bottom: The future site of the Falker's direct-to-market store.



Mark encourages all farmers to get involved in their local community government, saying farmers can make a difference and help educate the non-farming public just by showing up to the meetings and voicing their concerns.

The Falkers also interact with the community through on-farm sales of eggs, turkeys and beef. The family plans to start processing their own milk and making other dairy products at an on farm store that is currently under construction, with a goal of selling 100 percent of their milk at the store within 10 years.

"My mother started selling eggs and chickens directly to the public in 1948," Mark says. "This is just a continuation of that. The area surrounding the farm is so developed, the customer base is right here. Everybody's a potential customer."

When Brandon returned to the family farm, the Falkers knew they would have to either expand their herd or do something else to augment the farm's income. Since Brandon will own the farm, Mark left the decision up to him, helping Brandon weigh all the options.

"There isn't room to milk more cows here, it was either go direct to market or sell this farm and

move to a place where we could have more cows," Brandon says. "Since I'm the one who is going to continue farming, dad left that decision up to me."

Part of Brandon's inspiration for going direct to market came when he interned at Cook's Dairy Farm in Ortonville through the MSU Ag Tech program. Cook's processes and markets milk on their farm.

"I really enjoyed working there, and decided I'd rather do that than milk more cows," Brandon says.

The building is constructed, but due to low milk prices, the Falker's dream has been put on hold for a while before they can purchase processing equipment and finish the inside of the building.

"We got the barn built, went back to the banks and that's when

the economy took a dive," Mark says. "Now the banks won't touch anyone in the dairy industry."

Depending on how long the dairy recession lasts, another option is to get investors involved, but the Falkers say that doesn't look good now either, as the economic woes are hitting nearly everyone in the area. Instead, the pair are choosing to build what they can afford, when they can afford it, noting they should be able to put all of the cement down in the building before winter as long as their Thanksgiving turkey sales were lucrative.



Howardale Farm Facts:

MMPA Members of: District 7 and the St. Clair-Macomb Local

Herd size: 55 milking and dry; 55 replacements

Acres farmed: 630

Milking set-up: 52 cow tie stall with 5 milkers

Ag and community involvement: Brandon is a board member of the Macomb County Farm Bureau where he also serves as a Young Farmer co-chair and a delegate to Michigan Farm Bureau's State Annual Meeting.

"One thing that makes a difference on our farm is...Our ability to educate the public due to our location."