

Successful Transitions

2009 MMPA District 5 OYDC Mark and Tana Buning

Successfully transitioning the farm from one generation to the next is no longer a concern at Buning Dairy Farm, LLC, owned by Mark Buning, his brother Norm, their father, Larry and uncle Doug. The farm partners were able to sit down and cooperatively work out a succession plan for the farm with the help of a consulting firm. According to Mark, a key to that process was open communications between the younger and older partners.

The family called on representatives from Lookout Ridge Consulting in Portage who helped open up the lines of communication between all of the farm partners and their respective families. Initially, each individual partner and his spouse met with the consultants. Later, there were many group meetings and teleconferences to work through the

many details of the succession plan.

“Working together this way helped deal with both legal and emotional items we may not have known were important had we not worked with the consultants,” Mark says.

The individual meetings allowed each partner and his spouse to speak freely with the consultants, and some of those meetings highlighted items that needed to be discussed within the family forum.

As part of their succession plan, the Bunings all get monthly profit and loss statements so every partner and his spouse knows where the farm is at financially.

“Even though Tana has a full-time job off the farm, the succession planning taught me that it’s important to tell her what’s going on at the farm,” Mark says, admitting he used to assume she would know everything about farming just because he did.

Mark and Norm are quite like-minded as far as farm planning is concerned. While they do plan to grow the herd, Mark says right now the brothers are focused on getting back from the financial hardships of the past year.

“Right now we’re focused on recovery,” Mark says. “We’ve got debts to pay off, our milking parlor needs to be updated and we need to create additional heifer housing.”

While milk prices were still favorable last year, the Bunings built a

160-stall freestall barn to help

keep up with growing herd numbers. The farm’s 180 stall barn attached to its double-6 herringbone parlor just wasn’t big enough.

“Over the last five years, most of our herd growth has been from within the herd,” Mark says. “As we grow, the internal growth keeps getting faster. We’re having more heifer calves and herd health is better.”

Mark attributes some improvements in herd health to three times a day milking, which Mark and Norm decided to test out around two years ago.

“The 3X milking has helped with herd health because there’s people in the barn between 16-17 hours per day,” Mark explains. “We’re able to catch heats at an hour that usually someone wasn’t in the barn.”

Before implementing the additional milking, Norm and Mark discussed their plan with Larry and Doug, who agreed to it, “as long as they weren’t on the schedule for the nighttime milking,” Mark says.

The senior partners may not have been interested in the nighttime milking spot, but one of the farm’s full time employees volunteered to take all of the nighttime shifts.

“He’s done really well for us,” Mark says. “We occasionally get a call to help with a cow, but overall, he does well and can take care of downed or sick cows on his own. It’s been quite awhile since we’ve had a call from him for help.”

The Bunings value the farm’s three full-time and two part-time employees, saying they are very committed to the farming operation and have been very understanding about a current wage freeze due to the low milk price.

“They’ve all been very understanding,” Mark says. “We try to do what we can for the employees, they’ve been a blessing to us. Sometimes we give them gas cards, we always give them hamburger and



Top: The Buning family: Haley, Mark, Tana and Katelyn.

Bottom: Cows in the farm's new 160 stall freestall barn.

butter, as it's on the farm and they may take what they need."

The Bunings dedication to their employees is further exemplified by their willingness to hold open a position for an employee who worked for them and had to return to Mexico for nine months in order to become a legal citizen of the United States.

"It was tough not having him here, but my brother's sons helped out until he returned," Mark says. "He came back and is a very good man to have on the farm."

The employee is currently working toward full U.S. citizenship and is looking forward to taking his oath to the U.S. in Tiger Stadium someday.

While the farm provides the employees with some staple foods during the year, the Bunings also say it's important to recognize employees' efforts during the holidays.

"During the holiday season we give them gift certificates to the local merchant which has clothing, boots, coats, jeans that they can use for farm work," Mark says. "It also gives back to the local businesses in the area."

The Buning farm's unique location in the center of the town of Falmouth has posed more opportunity than challenges so far. The community surrounding them is dotted with dairy and other types of farms, so the residents in general are accustomed to the sounds and smells of farms.

"The farm is right in the middle of town," Tana says. "There is a store and a restaurant directly across the street from the farm."

On summer nights, it's not unusual for folks to wander over to the farm from the store or restaurant and ask to see the calves, or other parts of the Buning operation.

"Most of the time if we aren't busy, we will take the time to talk to them and allow them to see the calves," Mark says. "We have an open door policy."

Being in the center of the community's eye makes it even that much more important for the Bunings to "do things right," according to Mark. Being verified in the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) is one of the ways the Bunings show they are being good stewards of the land.

"We were one of the MAEAP trial farms," Mark says. "We had been doing things right, so we just had to do some small things to become verified. It wasn't a case where we didn't know what we needed to work on, a lot of it was stuff we procrastinated from doing such as putting fences around the manure pit."

Mark recommends that all farmers, no matter what their farm size, should consider working toward MAEAP verification as soon as they're able, because nobody knows what the future holds as far environmental permitting goes. He believes it is especially important to keep up with environmental recommendations as his family's farm grows to avoid costly fixes later.

"When you grow, it's important to know the things you need to work on," Mark says. "Ignoring it is not good, because when the time comes it's likely going to be very expensive to fix."



Buning Dairy Farm Facts:

MMPA Members of: District 5 and the Evert Local

Herd size: 270 milking and dry, 232 replacements

Acres farmed: 840

Milking set-up: Double-6 herringbone parlor

Ag and community involvement: Mark formerly served on Michigan Farm Bureau's State Young Farmer Committee.

"One thing that makes a difference on our farm is... We're not afraid to plan for future generations."