

Q&A with MMPA General Manager Joe Diglio

Get to know our co-op's new general manager as he outlines his past experience and future plans to help MMPA continue its legacy of success and profitability.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. What past experience do you bring to your role?

I was born in Syracuse, New York and came to Michigan at a young age when my father, Clem, a cancer research doctor, was hired at Wayne State University. My mother, Joan, had the dubious task of raising five children while my father worked diligently to provide for our family.

My parents taught me the importance of a strong work ethic and an appreciation for family.

Thanks to the tuition break for university employees' kids, I graduated from Wayne State University with a Bachelor's of Science degree with a concentration in accounting in 1991.

My first exposure to dairy was working in the ice cream processing department at Michigan Dairy in Livonia while attending college. I have worked for MMPA for 23 years, serving in a variety of accounting roles. Most recently, I served as the cooperative's director of finance and controller for 10 years.

Throughout my tenure, I've gained a wide understanding of the cooperative and farm credit systems as well as the strategies MMPA has used to remain financially viable. I have a vast knowledge of how our operations work; with my background in finance, I understand how all parts of the business contribute to the bottom line.

I've been married to my wife, Lisa, for 17 years and enjoy golfing and traveling with her when we have the opportunity to do so.

What brought you to MMPA and why have you stayed with the cooperative for so long?

It's a funny story actually. I was working right out of college for a local public accounting firm (Robert Toll and Associates) and had taken a vacation day to golf with some friends. I ran into one of my college buddies at the course who was a recruiter. He remembered my background working for the Michigan Dairy and told me about an accounting opening at this place called the Michigan Milk Producers Association. I interviewed for the position that afternoon.



MMPA General Manager Joe Diglio talks with member Nate Elzinga at the 2014 Ag Expo

I distinctly remember Paul Jermanus, the controller at the time, asking me where I wanted to be in five years. I told him, "Well, I think I want your job!" I don't think he knew how to take that, especially since he wasn't looking to retire anytime soon. But I got the accounting job. I've stayed because of the continuous opportunities the co-op has provided me to learn and grow.

I truly appreciate the cooperative model and admire the dual-purpose of extracting value for our members while showing value to our customers. Plus, I wouldn't pass up working with the interesting personalities I've had the pleasure to call coworkers all these years. It's nice to work for a company where, if you work hard and have a passion for what you do, opportunities present themselves.

From your experience, what sets MMPA apart from other dairy cooperatives and processors?

Our diversification. We offer a diverse product mix to the national and international dairy marketplace while maintaining a strong presence in our state. Since we have deep roots in Michigan, we offer a diverse set of services and added value catered to our member owners. In my opinion, our cooperative offers more comprehensive value to members than others within the industry.

What is your vision for the future of MMPA?

At MMPA, we need to be strong partners with our members. We need to continue to differentiate ourselves in the marketplace by paying attention to our producers' wants, needs and expectations in order to add value to all Michigan producers.

We also need to think strategically while aligning ourselves with our partners in the industry. We need to work with our customers and other cooperatives to align our messages and show a united front to all consumers of our products.

What are the biggest challenges you see facing MMPA members and the dairy industry?

The challenges we face as an industry align with the same challenges our members face. Our members have become extremely efficient in milk production and we continue to see milk production in this region grow. The increase in milk production of course, places pressure on our plants to keep pace with our growing supply. This can be a good problem to have because it allows us to look for additional ways to utilize the milk in the marketplace, like our recently announced Reverse Osmosis project with Foremost Farms. On the farm side, our members are facing more and more pressures from consumers to explain modern animal agriculture practices and to be more transparent in their operations. This is a new way of doing business for our farms and at MMPA we are doing our best to help them meet these challenges through programs like FARM. MMPA has always been a solid partner with its farms and I see this partnership strengthening even more as we continue to face more pressures throughout the dairy supply chain. This is where I believe the cooperative model fits in so well – understanding our member owner needs and our customer demands allows us to optimize value for both the producer and the end-user.

What do you admire most about our MMPA member farms?

Definitely their passion and dedication to producing quality milk. We not only have some of the best milk in the state, but some of the highest quality milk in the country, and that's not easy. It takes a continuous commitment from our members, day-in and day-out.

I also appreciate our members' willingness to grow with the co-op. They've embraced investment in new capital opportunities when called upon and realize the importance of growing the cooperative to meet the needs of their production.

What's your favorite part of the job?

By far, I most enjoy the producer interaction that comes with my new role. I'm a "people person" and like to learn from others. I'm big about having a dialogue with our members and employees to solve problems that ensure success. It's critically important, in my mind, to communicate with members and employees so everyone knows who we are and where we are going. What makes this job special are the members, employees and partners working together cooperatively to attain a common goal.



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