



Nature Ridge Organic Dairy's 2,450 Holstein/Jersey crossbreeds produce close to 111,000 pounds of milk daily for Glanbia Foods' cheese.

Photo by Tyler Gilbert

Organic or Processed: It's One or the Udder

Three partners launch state-of-the-art organic dairy in Raft River

By Dianna Troyer

Three times a day, the cows at Nature Ridge Organic Dairy in Raft River take a six-minute ride on a circular 60-stall rotating carousel as they are milked.

"Some of them like it so much, they don't want to get off," says Kevin Schroeder, one of three partners who opened the dairy in 2016.

"We're heading into our second lactation cycle," he says as he watches a morning milking from a mezzanine in the milking barn.

Cows wait their turn in a holding pen with a capacity of 330.

About 111,000 pounds of organic milk is produced daily for Glanbia Foods' cheese production. The dairy's 30 full-time employees care for 2,450 Holstein/Jersey crossbreeds.

"We like the components of a Jersey and the production of a Holstein," Kevin says.

He and his partners, Reed Gibby and Ray Robinson, opened the dairy to fill a niche market. Glanbia needed milk to supply cheese to the increasingly popular

organic food market.

The three partners brought their expertise to the new business. Kevin specializes in buying feed, and recycling and disposing of agricultural waste products.

Ray, a member of a co-op called High Desert Milk in Burley, owns dairies that milk 20,000 cows daily.

Reed, a local businessman, started a nearby pig farm.

"Reed found some ground that had been out of production for decades, making it ideal to develop as an organic dairy," Kevin says. "No chemicals or commercial



Clockwise from top left, Kevin Schroeder is one of three proud owners of Nature Ridge Organic Dairy. Tyler Gilbert, pictured with chillers and a holding tank, manages the dairy. Thirty full-time staff help care for the 2,450 Holstein/Jersey crossbreed cows at the sprawling dairy. The 60-stall milking carousel is the highlight of field trips.

fertilizers had been used on it.”

To be certified organic, the dairy complies with standards set by the Idaho Department of Agriculture.

“This is our first organic farm,” Kevin says. “We learned about the rules and regulations you have to comply with to be certified. Compared to a traditional dairy, production costs are a little higher, but you can sell the milk for a little more to offset that.”

All hay, grains and minerals must be certified organic. Affidavits documenting that information accompany each load of feed that arrives at the dairy. The business is routinely audited.

“Most of our growers are from southeastern Idaho,” says Kevin. “We buy corn in Nebraska due to the high

volume we need.”

Dairy cow nutrition is complex.

“Heifers, lactating cows and dry cows have different diets,” Kevin says. “Most people don’t realize how precisely the ingredients of their diets are controlled.”

As a loader scoops feed from storage areas and places it in a hopper, a computer weighs the hay, grain, minerals and water to get the proper amounts.

When he began managing the dairy, Tyler Gilbert became familiar with organic regulations.

“It’s been a good learning experience,” Tyler says, citing a few of the rules.

Thirty percent of the cows’ diet has to come from fresh grass during the grazing season from May to September. The cows are rotated through different sections of

pastures on the 1,650-acre farm.

Organic standards prohibit use of medication other than vaccines. If a cow needs antibiotics, it is treated, separated from the herd and sent to a non-organic dairy. A cow’s tail cannot be docked.

Kevin is optimistic about the dairy’s future.

“We milked our first heifer in December 2016,” he says. “By the first week in January, we began milking about 100 more each week as they calved. By spring, we were down to calving about 50 to 70 a week.”

Kevin says the milking carousel is the most popular stop on field trips.

“We’ve taken a lot of students on a tour,” he says. “We want them to understand how their food is produced.” ■