Family expands dairy farming operations

Fourth-generation farmers look to tradition, organic products as way of market survival

MT HERMON (AP) — After four generations as dairy farmers, one Washington Parish family is now running its own processing plant, as well.

Warren Smith and 10 of his relatives run Smith Creamery, which sees traditional products as its way to survive in the 21st century.

They sell old-fashioned butter and pasteurized milk — the kind where the cream still rises to the top.

Since it's all from their own herd, they can guarantee that it's free of any hormone additives.

"This is the only option we have," said Smith's son, Travis Smith. "If we want to stay in the dairy business, this is the only way we're going to get it done. We were just losing money left and right.

"It's not for lack of work or effort, it's just the prices are so far down, it's costing you more to produce than you get paid for." Smith, his parents, sister, brother-in-law, grandparents and an aunt and uncle work seven days a week at the creamery.

Some come home from other jobs to work at the plant. If one person misses a day's duties, all feel it.

After four generations as dairy farmers, the Smiths started their new venture on April 6, 2002. It feels like much longer, Smith said.

"So far, we're making very good progress," he said. "Don't get me wrong, we're not where we need to be. But at least you see we're taking baby steps in the right direction. This is our only way to survive this thing.

"This thing" is the struggling local dairy industry. Dairy farmers are today getting the same price for their raw milk that they got 30 years ago, though costs for almost everything is far higher.

Many local dairy farms have disappeared while others have tried to grow bigger or increase production in some other way just to survive.

Smith is among those who blame aggressive out-of-state dairy cooperatives for the decline of Louisiana's dairy industry.

"If you are part of a co-operative, you pay these people to come down here, flood your market and drive your prices down," Smith said. "They have a compact, we don't. That's why we get hammered on the price. One day people will appreciate us when milk is $7 a gallon."

The Smith family sells surplus milk to a co-op — always at a loss, Smith said.

Even with advice from others who have done the same thing, it's an uphill struggle, he said.

"One thing about it, it really brings your family together. You're either going to kill each or get along — one or the other," Smith said.

The family is close. Despite the difficulties, he sees something he's never seen in any other workplace.

"Can you imagine working someplace where everybody is trying as hard as you are? We are very fortunate," he said.

The Smiths are accustomed to the milk producing end of the business, but marketing, "the new beast," is toughest of all so far, Smith said.

In addition to their own products, the Smiths offer Amish cheeses, jams and jellies brought in from Ohio.

The family has its own Smith Creamery store in Mt. Hermon and also sells through Cream of the Crop in Hammond and the farmers market in Baton Rouge, Smith said.