

Farmer starting out with different business model

BY DENISE PORTER
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Breaking into almost any business at a young age requires nerves of steel, hard work, dedication, and — normally — a sizeable loan.

Breaking into the dairy business is no different, but can be even more daunting due to the large amount of start-up capital required. Young would-be dairymen not born into the business — with their dairy-owning parents helping them to secure loans — usually must borrow upwards of \$200,000 to buy cattle.

But Brent Mays, 26, who rents a 70-acre farm on the Kilchis River, is no ordinary young dairy farmer.

Mays is attempting to start his own Jersey dairy by slowly purchasing cattle on a much smaller operating loan than normal. And, to augment his milk income, he charges other local dairymen for housing their dry cows on his farm.

It's all because as a teen-ager, he fell in love with Jersey cows. The Greensburg, Ky., native was raised on a five-acre tobacco and beef farm that supplemented his parents' income —



DENISE PORTER/HEADLIGHT-HERALD

Brent Mays rents a 70-acre farm on the Kilchis River, where he milks Jerseys.

his father works in a cabinet shop; his mother is a secretary.

Mays said his "love affair" with the Jersey began when he was employed at a neighbor's registered Jersey dairy.

"I hated growing tobacco," he said, "I always liked being around the dairy cows."

Mays said his love of the cows led him to pursue a degree in dairy science at Western Kentucky University. There he worked on the college's dairy milking cows and learning more about running a dairy.

"My best friend in college was big into showing cattle, and

I got bit by the showing bug," he said.

Mays worked on eight dairies before graduating from college. The summer before his senior year, he signed up for an internship with Sunset Canyon Jerseys in Beaver. It was his first trip to the West Coast and

he said he loved the area.

"I really liked it here. There are a lot of Jerseys and the summer weather was beautiful."

While interning with Sunset Canyon, Mays said, he learned a lot about marketing cattle based on their pedigrees. After finishing his undergraduate degree, he accepted a job with Silver Stream Jerseys in Tillamook and brought his small herd of 15 animals with him.

Under the eye of Shannon and Julie Lourenzo, owners of Silver Stream, Mays learned more about dairying and showing cattle.

"I learned more about cattle reproductive cycles and checking for pregnancy. It has always been my plan to have my own place someday."

The problem, he said, was that he didn't want to be burdened by a lot of start-up debt. He found the prospect of borrowing enough to buy a 200-cow herd to be daunting. And, as a single person, he knew he would need cash flow to pay for extra labor.

Instead, an idea hatched.

He decided to rent a farm, secure a small loan for just 75 cows, then make extra money renting space to Tillamook

farmers looking for much-needed heifer and dry cow housing.

The idea paid off.

Today, Mays has 229 animals on the 70-acre farm he rents from Sean and Judy Dooher.

"That's from the little calves on up," he noted.

Of those cattle, 63 are his — including milking and dry cows. He charges a daily fee for feeding and other expenses per animal housed.

Mays said his five-year goals are to increase his herd size and to develop the pedigree lines of his registered jerseys. He said his most serious challenges have been weather related.

"The flood was wild. I didn't have water in the barns, but still, I couldn't get out the driveway for a day and a half."

The December power outage shocked him for a different reason.

"I couldn't believe how many dairies didn't have generators. Thankfully, Sean did."

For their part, the Doohers said they are happy to help Mays.

"He was so excited about giving this a shot and it was refreshing to see," said Judy Dooher.