

Matthew Keesling  
25 July 2019

## INTRODUCTION

Good morning, My name is Matthew Keesling and I am the veteran's liaison for the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship and I work on a small organic dairy in northcentral Wi with my wife and daughter. I served 24 years of active duty in the Army with service in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am also an apprentice in the program, with less than one month left until graduation.

Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship is in 12 states with 180 approved Master Dairy Grazers, 45 of those are paired with apprentices. We have 30 journey grazers or graduates and over 100 apprentice candidates looking for the right opportunity in the dairy industry.

Personally, on the farm, we are members of a co-op, Organic Valley, and we are set to purchase the farm within the year. The farm has been with Organic Valley since 2005 and the value added from this co-op has been one key reason for the farms success and survival.

I would like to thank the members for holding such a hearing and gathering information to help shape programs and legislation for the next generation of farmers.

- There are three things that I would like to bring to the members attention that I have had experience with as I have worked toward being a business owner and dairy man. Those are;
  - Federal programs that I have attempted to use and the outcomes of those. with a focus on the Farm Service Agency within the USDA.
  - Education and training offered for dairy and agriculture versus what is needed. (University vs OJT)
  - And finally the concept and importance of community based agriculture and mentorship for anyone entering the agriculture industry. (New Dairy Concept)
  
- **FEDERAL PROGRAMS USED / ATTEMPTED TO USE**
  - In 2012 as I became eligible for retirement from the Army I visited USDA/FSA in Emporia, Kansas to discuss financing in order to start a dairy from scratch. Over the previous four years we had purchased the land and some necessary equipment, discussed necessary permits with local and county agencies, selected our herd, freestall and parlor design and secured a feed source and milk processor. I worked with three local dairymen that were close to retirement through this process and had spent numerous hours on their farms learning the finer points of being a dairyman. I worked with SBA and SCORE to develop and finalize my business plan even though the mentor was not in agriculture. That day in Emporia I was told that even though I had taken these steps and the business plan was solid

- I did not have enough education in agriculture. I took this information, stayed in the Army instead of retiring and started to look for ways to meet the education requirements of lenders.

- In 2017 I finally retired and had entered into the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program and relocated to Wisconsin - where better to learn to dairy than the dairy state itself. Early on I visited the USDA/FSA office in Wausau, WI to ensure that I was on the right path to buy an existing dairy farm. Again I was met with resistance and informed that even after graduation from the DGA - I would not meet the requirement for experience. I would need another 3 years of managing or owning/operating a dairy to qualify for a beginning farmer loan.
- With all of the areas or categories that I thought I had qualifications in; my Veteran status / being a Beginning Farmer / years of Management experience / Education both from a University and through an Apprenticeship program. Nothing translated to agriculture and dairy so I would have to go find a job and work in a management position for three years before I could be seen as an acceptable risk to the FSA.
- Existing federal support programs brief well but are far from where I believe they were intended to be. There is the need to provide clearer guidance to federal program offices if this is truly the case.

- **EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

- I would like to go back to 2012 and share some of the searching that I did to try to meet the education requirements that I was informed I needed. This also shows how I ended up where I am at currently.
- I already had education and management experience but it was not specialized in agriculture and therefore not applicable. I was still on active duty so I was in search of any programs that could provide the knowledge while I met my military obligations.
- I found several online programs however they were only for agribusiness, with very similar courseloads to the Bachelors that I already had, and I found that there are zero non-resident programs for dairy specifically.
- It did surprise me that the majority of the instruction and training was in classroom only not on a farm. I found that I could take online courses to satisfy the education requirement on paper but it did not encompass both the Art and Science of farming.
- The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship offered the only real option to gain both while not postponing the desire to own and operate my own business for 3-5 years. Not only would I be on a dairy farm gaining valuable experience from a successful mentor, the program requires the requisite financial education and farm business plan development as part of the related instruction.

- **COMMUNITY BASED AGRICULTURE AND MENTORSHIP**

- Along this path I have learned that Mentorship is critical when entering a new industry. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program has been there since we started DGA and maybe their focus could be on supporting the trainer as well as trainee.
- SBA and SCORE were not able to support agriculture businesses (tech, consulting, retail) one size does not fit all. I do not know if the mentors were just not making themselves available or if they did not exist. DGA has since found these mentors and enlisted them.
- DGA is the platform for both education and training the next generation of dairy farmers. With the New Dairy Concept we have the potential to mimic this nationwide.
  - Regulations do not prevent this model but can support it. This model does not hinder but enables the dairy industry while providing a diversified feed system and food security. This model builds rural communities and the environment.

- **THREE THINGS NEEDED GOING FORWARD**

- As you are well aware there are always needs and for the beginning dairy farmer they are; Access to capital, access to a market and a network or community of dairy farms to lean on and grow with.

- **CLOSING**

- In closing I would ask that you all invest in a model that is proven to work – apprenticeships
- Protect the grants that are currently available and allocate them to better serving non-profits. Universities "study" but non-profits "do". Allow incentives for trainers and mentors as they grow the next generation of farmers.
- Limit vertical integration of the dairy industry and regulate to protect the "Ag of the Middle" to ensure that the next generation at least has an opportunity to enter this fine example of being a true entrepreneur. Thank you for your time and for listening to my testimony today.