



Rubbed raw!



RAW DEAL? Trent Hendricks still contends the state acted without proof in linking a 2008 *Campylobacter* outbreak to his farm's raw milk.

By **JOHN VOGEL**

LESS than three years after buying their Telford, Pa., farm, Trent and Rachael Hendricks had become one of the Keystone State's largest raw milk producers.

Hunger for raw milk, artisan cheeses, grass-fed meats and other natural products drew many natural foods consumers and chefs to Hendricks Farms & Dairy, feeding robust sales growth.

The couple's success amazed and inspired other farmers, ag educators, even natural foods advocates.

The Montgomery County business produced and marketed national award-winning farmstead cheeses. Customers

Key Points

- This model value-added biz survived a very tough dairy year.
- Despite alert, *Campylobacter* was not uncovered on farm.
- Raw milk is an incredibly risky business to be in.

flocked to their farm store from as far away as New York City and New Jersey.

Raw milk and cheeses accounted for 35% of their sales. That other 65% came from diversified products — and would prove crucial to their survival.

In early September 2008, state health officials began receiving reports of *Campylobacter* food poisoning from within the state, New York and New Jersey.

All allegedly had a common connection: raw milk from this farm.

State agriculture and health investigators descended on the farm to confirm the source — but didn't. The one positive-testing milk sample came from an open, undated, unlabeled container. (See related story on Page 8.)

On Sept. 12, Pennsylvania

Department of Agriculture rescinded the farm's raw milk permit. But with confirmation of *Campylobacter* in seven households, a consumer alert was issued regarding the raw milk risk.

After two weeks of extensive testing, the Hendrickses were allowed to resume selling raw milk.

Devastating impact

Long-lasting damage to their business had already been done.

"The state all but put us out of business," asserts this still-angry farmer. Despite the Health Department's epidemiological evidence pointing to Hendricks Farms & Dairy, "their charge was unproven," contends Hendricks.

"We took our own samples when they took samples, and sent them to our laboratory. Neither one found [the pathogen] here."

Today, the farm's market focus is on grass-fed beef, aged cheeses and specialty meats.

"Our business is less than half of what it was before all this started," he sighs. "It affected all of our products. We're fortunate that beef was the biggest part of our business and that we still have more than 300 families."

Raw milk is still in the farm store's refrigerated section. "But it won't be our business's growth driver," confirms Hendricks.

What's the take-home from this incident? "Government isn't there to support you. And, raw milk is an incredibly risky business to be in, even with good liability coverage," Hendricks says.

"If you're not passionate about raw milk, you have no business operating a raw milk dairy. If it's just about increasing milk income and saving the family farm, you're better off making and marketing cheeses — or selling the farm."

Learn more about Hendricks Farms & Dairy products and marketing strategies at www.hendricksfarmsanddairy.com.

■ For more on raw milk issues, see Page 8.

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