

Working together to thrive

By RICHARD DAVIS

ZACK McCullen III was raised with a strong work ethic, a lesson he learned from his father, Zack McCullen Jr., and has passed on to his own son, Zeke. If you have any doubts, just ask Zeke.

"My dad always told me to work hard and to always finish something once I started it," he says. "Not only that, but he always told me to make sure I do a job right the first time."

Zeke's father smiles when he hears this, like they're sharing an inside joke — only it's no joke.

Looking over at his own father, who's resting in his pickup truck, he says: "That was something that was put into my head, too, when I was growing up. ... My dad taught both my brother and me to work extremely hard because the reality is that nobody gives you anything. You've got to earn everything you get out here. I'd say that is especially true today, in these trying financial times."

Today, Zack McCullen III runs a pork operation under contract with Prestage Farms. At the same time, he is a vice president of swine production for Prestage, having been with the company since it started about 25 years ago. Now, in addition to his farming operation, he oversees the company's swine production in North Carolina and Iowa. That is a lot of production.

There are 10,000 finishing hogs on the family operation at any given time, as well as a cow-calf beef operation. Zack III turns day-to-day operations over to his son when he needs to. That confidence allows him to follow his career at Prestage.

"I'm able to do it because I have my daddy and Zeke here," he says. "I can go off for a week if I need to, and I don't have to worry about anything here because I know they've got it under control."

Story of three Zacks

Zack McCullen Jr. is the oldest of the three generations on this Sampson County farm. Then there is Zack McCullen III, vice president at Prestage. And

Key Points

- Pork provides an economic basis for family farms.
- Farm lifestyle teaches work ethic and determination.
- Modern production practices make the industry viable.

there is Zeke, whose real name is — you guessed it — Zack McCullen IV. With all these "Zacks" around, at some point the family took to calling the youngest Zeke, just to avoid confusion.

"They do all the work now," says the elder Zack, smiling. "The truth is my health won't let me do it anymore. I'm just an aggravation out here, so I sit in the truck. But then it doesn't take a lot of physical labor anymore the way it used to because of all the automated systems they have today."

They work cooperatively, running the operation as one unit, although technically it is divided. The eldest has about 7,500 finishing hogs. Zack III has another 1,860 head at any given time. They receive the pigs into the houses at 45 pounds and grow them up to 265 pounds.

"They come in and they go out," Zack III says. "We turn those animals around about two and a half times a year."

They work the cattle as a combined operation.

Large pork operations often



BOSSSES AND LEADERS:

Zack McCullen Jr. has always given his children and grandchildren this advice: "You don't have to be a boss, but be a leader."



FEED COST IS KEY: Zack McCullen III, Clinton, N.C., is a pork and beef producer and also a vice president of swine operations in North Carolina and Iowa for Prestage Farms. He says the industry is poised for more profitability if feed input costs drop. Also pictured is Cutter, the family dog.

come under criticism from those outside of farming for the methods of handling hogs, often in individual boxes. The critics call "confinement" animal operations factory farms. Yet it is modern handling techniques that have allowed these three generations to stay on the farm and work together as a family, not a factory.

Lower mortality

Livestock farming has been under input pressure in recent years, particularly since bio-fuels began diverting corn from the feed chain and raising the price of corn used for feedstock. Yet, Zack III says, thanks to modern methods they have been able to survive.

He praises the modern confinement system.

"You are not having to raise pigs out on the range, and they are not out running in the yard," he says. "A pig has got to have individual care, and in confinement operations you can treat them and feed them individually. It is better for the producer and better for the pig."

There are also biosecurity



HANDS ON: Zeke McCullen, son of Zack McCullen III, often gets the responsibility for day-to-day operations on the family hog and beef farm.

advantages. Workers shower and change into clean clothes and shoes before entering the houses. Inside there are also disinfectant dip pans.

These measures have helped keep mortality costs down. And although there have been difficulties from high feed costs, the situation probably would have been much worse except for

some lucky timing.

"They have made some breakthroughs with vaccines in the last couple years," Zack III says. "One is circo virus vaccine for a disease which was really affecting herds industry-wide, driving the mortality up on finishing pigs. They came out with a new vaccine for it about two years ago, and they were able to produce enough of it in 2008 that most of the pigs in the industry are being vaccinated with it. It has improved our herd health overall. It has improved our livability. We have better feed conversions and better average daily gain than we've had in previous years."

That vaccine has saved pork producers a lot of money and kept many in business.

"The market has not been our problem," Zack III says. "Actually, the market in 2008 was better than the 10-year average. The problem is ethanol, because the ethanol producers are competing to buy our corn for fuel. If we didn't have this problem ... the swine industry would be profitable today."