

Florida farmer processes dairy success

By BRAD HAIRE

THE milk business runs thick through Dale McClellan's veins.

McClellan grew up in the industry. His grandfather owned and operated Sunny Brook Dairy, a well-known dairy and milk processing facility in Tampa, Fla. It's also where McClellan met his wife, Mary.

But in the late 1970s, Sunny Brook fell on hard times, mostly due to competition and pressure from large corporations. In 1977, with a loan from his grandfather, McClellan retained 500 head of the old Sunny Brook herd. He was 23. By 1987, he had leased the old processing facility from his grandparents. With all-new equipment, M&B Products started — one truck and one customer at a time.

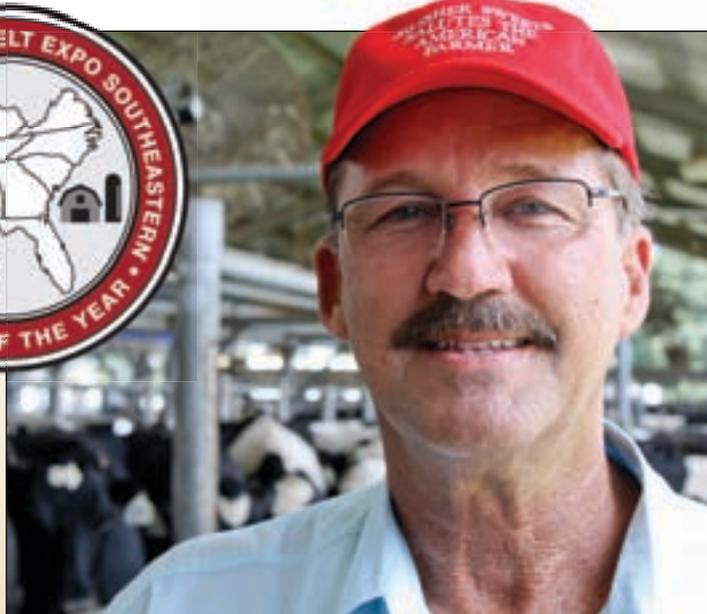
The company makes "Fresh from Florida" milk and orange juice, along with other flavors. The drinks can be shipped in three easy-to-use sizes with three different package options. The primary buyers are Florida school systems, now in 21 counties. By marketing the Mr. J juice and Cool Cow milk brands, the company expedited the accep-

tance of low-sugar, fat-free milk and vitamin-fortified, flavored juices. M&B has the capacity to produce 3 million packages a day.

Premier Milk is the Ocala, Fla.-based marketing cooperative McClellan helped establish with three other dairies. Now with 13 dairies, plans are to expand even more in coming year. Premier helps get higher mailbox prices for its farmers by paying a premium for high-quality milk. The co-op keeps a low overhead, which allows for better returns to its farmers. The co-op provides the milk McClellan uses at M&B Products.

From the dairy to processing to delivery, McClellan's company employs 160 people. Seven are family members, including all three of McClellan's sons. Leon manages the dairy. Bryan is distribution manager at the processing facility. Daniel is the shipping manager. Daniel's wife is M&B's office manager.

In 2003, McClellan moved his



700-cow herd from Hillsborough County to Citrus County. The rolling herd average is 22,900 pounds of milk per year. He farms 1,200 acres; 320 acres are owned. The rest is rented.

Some people in Citrus County didn't like the idea of a new dairy. They protested. McClellan saw it as an educational moment for the public. He smoothed things out and from that helped form the Agricultural Alliance of Citrus

County, an interest group that fosters economic development in the county. Anyone is welcome. The alliance now has a strong political and economic voice.

McClellan's cows live on waterbeds. Fans and misters keep them cool in Florida's heat. McClellan hopes to use sand beds for the cows soon. He wants to double his herd size and continue to expand marketing areas.

He sloped his dairy's land to

drain runoff water properly and created a nifty way, using a large screening machine, to separate the solid waste from the dairy water, recycling the brown water to irrigate forage crops. The design keeps dairy water and rainwater separate. Waste storage is minimized, a big plus during Florida's stormy events.

McClellan is looking for a better way to get rid of the farm's manure, as it is costly to dispose of properly. He's talking with Citrus County to combine its yard waste with his manure to create a compost-fertilizer product the county can either sell in bulk to landscapers or bag and retail.

McClellan admits some of the bigger milk processors and distributors might like to have a taste of what he's built, but they likely couldn't deliver the quality and local flare and service his team provides. "They [bigger companies] probably see me as a nuisance," he jokes.

"Getting the right people and right team together has been the key for me. It's where we have really been blessed and fortunate to have the people we have. ... I never imagined we could build what we have now," he says.

CONGRATULATIONS
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Month	Current	Previous
Total	22	2645
Sep	0	615
Aug	0	731
Jul	0	518
Jun	0	288
May	0	175
Apr	22	

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