

COMMENTARIES

Counterpoint: Minnesota's agricultural diversity is a strength, not a weakness

Riverview's model works for us, but no single model defines what farming looks like here.

By Brady Janzen

Guest contributor(s) to the Minnesota Star Tribune

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"Minnesota dairy farming has evolved significantly over the past century," Brady Janzen writes. "By 1995, the year Riverview built its first dairy, Minnesota's dairy industry had already undergone decades of transformation, with more than 90% fewer dairy farms and about 65% fewer dairy cows than in 1940." (David Joles/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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Agriculture in Minnesota is changing, just as it has for generations. A recent commentary about Riverview LLP's proposed dairy expansion focused on one view of those changes ("Huge dairy operations change the fabric of farm country," May 28). We believe a broader understanding of the forces shaping modern dairy farming is important to this conversation.

Minnesota dairy farming has evolved significantly over the past century, as it has across the country. Like many industries, agriculture continues to adapt to changing technologies, labor needs, consumer preferences, economic pressures and family succession realities. Every farm responds to those challenges differently, but change has long been a defining feature of American agriculture.

That evolution was underway long before Riverview's current proposal, or Riverview itself. By 1995, the year Riverview built its first dairy, Minnesota's dairy industry had already undergone decades of transformation, with more than 90% fewer dairy farms and about 65% fewer dairy cows than in 1940. Nationally, the U.S. has lost approximately 95% of its dairy farms over the past 50 years. These long-term trends are the result of many factors and cannot be attributed to any single farm or any single expansion. Since the early 2000s, Minnesota's dairy cow numbers have largely stabilized even as the structure of the industry has continued to evolve.

Minnesota's agricultural landscape is one of its greatest strengths. Row crops and specialty crops, hog operations and beef feedlots, direct-to-consumer farmers and commodity producers, on-farm dairy processing and large-scale cooperatives all play important roles. No single model defines what farming looks like here, and that diversity is not a weakness – it is resilience. Riverview's approach works for us, and farmers across this state who have built something lasting, in whatever form that takes, deserve to be recognized for contributing to strong rural communities while helping provide nutritious food for growing demand.

The opinion piece also suggested that Riverview's growth is reducing opportunity for other producers. Dairy pricing, however, is governed through a federally regulated system that applies to producers of all sizes. While individual farmers may have different experiences with different processors, milk is a commodity with a global marketplace. Milk prices are not determined by any single producer.

At the same time, dairy demand continues to grow both domestically and globally. The U.S. dairy industry is in the middle of significant expansion driven by rising consumer demand and increasing exports. Over the past decade, approximately \$10 billion has been invested nationally in new milk processing capacity. Minnesota has a real opportunity to participate in that growth, but doing so requires a growing milk supply and producers willing to continue adapting and investing for the future. With the West River Dairy expansion, we hope to be part of that reinvestment in Minnesota's dairy industry. We know from experience that a vibrant agricultural economy has impacts that extend well beyond the farm. In western Minnesota, we see firsthand what happens in communities where animal agriculture is growing – it supports farm co-workers and their families, local feed suppliers, veterinarians, equipment dealers, trucking companies, construction firms and many other small businesses that depend on a strong agricultural economy. The co-workers who will work at the expanded West River Dairy will live in these communities, send their children to local schools, shop at local businesses and contribute to the local tax base.

Questions about environmental stewardship are fair for any project, and Riverview has taken those responsibilities seriously throughout this process. We've engaged openly with regulators, provided detailed responses to community questions and maintained open lines of communication with stakeholders. For those interested in learning more, we are open for tours.

We are committed to environmental and community stewardship. Our farms use advanced manure management systems, nutrient management planning and engineering oversight under extensive state permitting requirements designed to protect water quality. And our proposed project has received strong support from people who know us as neighbors – community members, farmers and business owners across the region.

People may see the future of agriculture differently, but agriculture has always evolved. Minnesota's success will depend on creating conditions where farms of all sizes can continue to adapt, invest and contribute to strong rural communities for generations to come. That's a goal we share.

Brady Janzen is a partner at Riverview LLP.