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Rough road ahead due to milk hauler shortage

Colleen Kottke

At one time in his career, milk hauler Ron Meyer ran three routes picking up milk from over 45 farms. Today the Oakfield driver mans a single route, collecting milk from just a dozen remaining farms.

"I started seeing the decline in farms 20 years ago and its been steady ever since," says Meyer, 59, who has been driving truck for nearly 40 years. "Farmers are getting older and there's been plenty of years when they haven't made any money. They're just giving up."

Since 1970, the number of American dairy farms has dropped by over 93 percent, from more than 640,000 to fewer than 30,000, according to the USDA. While there are fewer farms, with dairy farm consolidation and expansion, there's still plenty of milk to transport to processing plants. However, there is a shortage of milk haulers available to do the job, which is a crucial link in the dairy supply chain.

Shortage of drivers

Meyer is among tens of thousands of drivers who have decided to retire from the industry. Economists with the American Trucking Association predict a shortage of more than 100,000 truck drivers nationwide by 2023. The exodus of both long-haul and short-run drivers will impact the transit of milk, feed, fuel and dairy products.

"The transportation industry is incredibly important to the agricultural industry," says Waupun Area High School Agriculture educator Tari Costello. "The milk we produce, and the vegetables and fruits we raise cannot tolerate a lag in the transportation from farm to processor and processor on to the consumer."

Industry experts say many older drivers retired from the profession during the pandemic. Shuttered driver training schools also emptied the pipeline of new, qualified drivers. Rising input costs, especially fuel have deterred drivers from continuing to log miles.

Meyer says the cost to keep his truck on the road has dug deeper into his profit margin.

"It used to cost between \$350-\$400 to fuel up the truck. Today it costs about



Oakfield area milk hauler Ron Meyer says rising fuel costs have eaten into his bottom line. He says a third of his income is consumed by diesel fuel to run his milk semi. COLLEEN KOTTKE / WISCONSIN STATE FARMER

\$800," he said. "So a third of what I'm making goes to diesel fuel, but you still have to keep the truck running."

The daily grind

As any farmer – and their milk hauler – knows, cows have to be milked seven days a week including holidays, and the milk trucked to the processing plant. Meyer, who owns the route and his truck, is responsible for finding relief drivers to give him a break from the daily grind.

"Most of the guys I've found are ex-farmers or someone who grew up on a farm," Meyer said.

Milk hauler Patrick Stobb, 30, didn't grow up on a farm, but the time spent helping out on nearby farms as a teen-

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Milk hauler Patrick Stobb pulls into the driveway of the Van Ruiswijk family farm. It is just one of four dairies left in the town of Lamartine in Fond du Lac County. COLLEEN KOTTKE / WISCONSIN STATE FARMER



Spotted Cow has been made at New Glarus Brewing since 1997. DANIEL HIGGINS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

Making paper

Wisconsin products show up in kitchens, bathrooms — even on beer

Becky Jacobs

Appleton Post-Crescent
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

The brown paper wrapped around a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. Charmin toilet paper. The label on a Spotted Cow beer. A lottery ticket. Dynamite paper.

Those are just some of the paper prod-

ucts that people use in their daily lives that are made in Wisconsin.

The state's paper industry generates more than \$18 billion in gross output each year and employs more than 30,000 people, according to a study released earlier this year by the Wisconsin Paper Council and the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Center for Customized Research and Services.

SA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin reached out to paper companies from La Crosse to Rhinelander to Green Bay to find out what products they make. Here are some items that people might find in their homes.

Sprecher Root Beer labels are made by Inland Packaging in La Crosse, while Finnish Ahlstrom makes dynamite paper

Ahlstrom, a Finnish paper company, makes an array of specialty papers at its four facilities in Rhinelander, Mosinee, Kaukauna and De Pere, including the brown paper that holds Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. The company also creates wrappers for different fast food restaurants, Mission chip bags, the liner inside cans of chips or dough, the paper wrap for

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Shortage

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ager gave the Waupun area man an appreciation of the dairy industry. He began to seriously think of a career in the trucking industry during a job shadowing opportunity in high school.

"I rode with a guy I knew who drove milk truck and a few others and decided I liked doing this," said Stobb who went on to obtain his commercial driver's license with a tanker endorsement at the age of 18. In order to haul milk, he was also required to apply for a bulk milk weigher and sampler license, which instructs drivers in the proper methods of loading, measuring, sampling and unloading bulk milk.

For the past 12 years, Stobb rises before the break of dawn and heads out his first stop of the day. Depending on the

number of stops on his route that particular day, or if there is a delay in unloading the truck at a processing plant he may make it home by nightfall.

Stobb says he's worked countless holidays and weekends, missing out on family gatherings and much needed time off. In addition to his regular route, Stobb helps out from time to time, filling in for a Columbus couple who also haul milk. This makes for a long work week where he sometimes puts in 80 hours.

"How do you find new workers after giving a description of the job, especially if that person has a young family?" Stobb said.

Workers at a premium

In today's job market, employers are desperate to attract talent, often sweetening the pot against the competition with sign-on bonuses, higher wages and benefits and promises of time off — creating an abundance of opportunities for those looking for work.

"There's so much competition out there. How do small trucking companies compete with Kwik Trip who advertises wages for drivers starting at \$90,000 a year with time off and benefits?" Stobb says.

John Fritzler, director of logistics and plant production planning with Michigan Milk Producers Association, told Dairy Herd Management that warehousing demand and e-commerce shopping have pulled resources away from the commercial driving field, leaving behind a wake of high driver turnover and unfilled positions. Walmart, another company competing for drivers, offers up to a \$105,000 a year starting salary in which drivers can begin earning personal time off upon the date of hire.

Corey Gillens, chief operating officer of Dairy Farmers (DFA) of America Mountain Area Council, told listeners on a recent Hoard's Dairy Livestream podcast that DFA has raised driver wages of their fleet five times over the past couple of years to



Ron Meyer of Oakfield who has been hauling milk for nearly 40 years is set to retire this fall. COLLEEN KOTTKE / WISCONSIN STATE FARMER

remain competitive and maintain workforce. The cooperative has also increased rates to contract haulers in order for them to maintain their operations, he said.

"Our new equipment costs are up 40%, fuel has doubled from what we were paying a couple of years ago, tires and oil and parts are up 30-40% and shop rates have nearly doubled," said Gillens. "So, not only is moving milk more difficult, it's much more expensive. And the lack of transportation puts milk at risk of being dumped."

Critical role

On Oct. 31, the average U.S. on-highway price of diesel was \$5.32 per gallon, up \$1.59 above the same time last year. And for drivers like Meyer who spend anywhere from \$.80 to \$1.00 per mile to keep those trucks rolling, thoughts of retiring or finding easier, more financially feasible jobs are not far from their minds...which concerns farmers who depend on their services.

Mark Thomas, who runs a small dairy in western Wisconsin with his brother-in-law, says their current milk hauler is contemplating retirement but has yet to find a buyer for his milk route. Like many routes across the country, the number of patrons has fallen sharply, worrying producers remaining in areas where operating dairy farms are few and far between.

"How many guys want to take on a route where they have to drive out of their way to pick up milk from a farm that's 40 miles away from the plant? For 25 years our milkman has picked up our milk, delivered it to the milk plant on time, regardless of the weather," Thomas said. "It's been a good partnership through the years, but I guess it can't last forever."

In addition to hauling fees, milk producers are left to pick up some of the extra costs in moving milk, including fuel surcharges.

"The truth is, dairy farmers subsidize some



Corey Gillens DFA

of the cost of getting milk to distant markets because the federal order prices don't pay enough," said Jeff Sims, chief market analysis officer for Lone Star Milk Producers. "Over time, someone else should have to pay and it shouldn't necessarily be dairy farmers. They should not subsidize fluid milk plants, intermediate customers or the end customers."

Stobb says he's heard through the grapevine of haulers serving notice to milk processors and farmers of their intention to stop transporting milk.

"Especially up north or in the western part of the state where the dairy farms are so spaced apart that it doesn't cover the driver's cost of diesel fuel to get there," Stobb said. "After paying for labor, fuel and maintenance, there isn't a whole lot of money to be made for the guy that owns the truck. I grew up in the trucking industry so I can see the whole picture."

Solutions

Stobb is acutely aware that the food supply chain runs on the efforts of milk haulers like himself, and at the moment his lifestyle allows him to put in the long hours that the job demands. But what about drivers with different circumstances? "The prospect of not having time off scares a lot of people away. Because it is a seven days a week job, there's less and less people who want to haul milk," Stobb said. "The company I work for has been getting calls from other milk plants and cooperatives that would like us to pick up milk for them. It would be nice to take on more milk but you can't push our drivers to do more than they're already doing."

Stobb believes that more drivers would be attracted into the industry if companies were able to offer job flexibility.



Patrick Stobb takes a milk sample from the bulk tank of the Van Ruiswijk family farm near Rosendale. COLLEEN KOTTKE / WISCONSIN STATE FARMER



A seal is placed on the rear of the milk tanker to ensure that the milk inside has not been tampered with. COLLEEN KOTTKE / WISCONSIN STATE FARMER

"Maybe two guys assigned to one truck working a rotating schedule with every other Friday through Sunday off," he said. "One thing that's out of our control and adds up to longer hours for haulers are the longer wait times at the plants. I've sat for hours waiting to unload because many of the plants running at capacity and are short-handed themselves."

He also believes that changes to the CDL licensing may be a barrier to new drivers entering the field.

"Instead of a written test and a simple road test, the Department of Transportation now requires prospective drivers to attend classes at an accredited institution where they accumulate classroom and behind the wheel hours," he said. "Some of the larger companies offer this in-house, which is something that smaller companies find hard to compete with."

Aside from the long hours and lack of personal time, the 30-year-old relishes the challenges and rewards of the job.

"You see a lot of cool scenery, beautiful sunrises and plenty of wildlife. I also have the chance to talk to lots of people throughout the day, from farmers to field reps, veterinarians, sales reps, nutritionists on the farm, as well as other milk haulers and personnel at the milk plants," Stobb says.

He also enjoys the challenges that Mother Nature throws his way.

"We're out there on the

road when no one else is — not even the mailman ventures out," Stobb laughed. "But at the end of these kinds of days you can say you did something that no one else did."

Farmgate partnerships

While his days are full, Stobb says he enjoys the rapport that he has developed with farm families on his route. One of the larger dairies that he visits every other day is the Van Ruiswijk family farm in Fond du Lac County. The farm is currently run by family patriarch Earl Van Ruiswijk and his two sons. Today the farm is just one of four dairy farms remaining in the town of Lamartine.

As Stobb checks the level of milk in the bulk tank and draws samples, Van Ruiswijk wanders in the milk house to chat. Despite the rollercoaster ride farmers have endured over the past seven years, he says his family is optimistic for the future and has invested in the operation in hopes of making it sustainable for future generations.

"You have to have a love for farming or you wouldn't stay in it," Van Ruiswijk says.

"Kind of like hauling milk," Stobb adds with a smile.

Stobb says that the milk hauler and dairy farmer share a special kinship and dedication to the industry.

"A lot of these people that I work with every day are almost like family to me since I see them more than I do my own family," he said.

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