

# **Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo**

## **Southeastern Farmer of the Year**

News Release  
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For Immediate Release

### **JERRY DAKIN NAMED 2022 FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Jerry Dakin's family dairy farm was started by his dad, Romanus (Pete) Dakin, in Livermore, Maine in 1948. From a modest sixteen cows, the operation grew over the post-World War II years. When Pete Dakin returned from a trip down south in October 1963, he informed his wife Jeannette that she and their four boys were moving to Florida.

Dakin recalled, "Being the youngest of the children allowed me the opportunity to learn a great deal from my brothers and perhaps have a bit of an easier time. I learned all I could about farming and knew early on that it would become a lifelong passion."

In 1990, Jerry Dakin and his brother bought out their Dad's operation and in 1997, split into two farms. Dakin recalled, "I began with 237 cows that grew to 750 in four years at the home dairy in Parrish. In 2001, I purchased the farm I run now, which has grown substantially."

Dakin Dairy Farms in Myakka City, Florida currently operates 1700 acres with 600 acres rented and 1100 acres owned. Farm yields are as follows: 700 acres of forage grasses yielding 50 tons/acre and 600 acres of sorghum yielding 18 tons/acre. Dakin owns 2700 milking head of dairy cows; 2000 head of dairy heifers; a beef cattle herd composed of 60 Brangus mama cows and 2 Wagyu bulls. The farms produce 52,000,000 lbs/per year of retail and wholesale milk through the efforts of 75 full-time employees.

Products on offer are fat-free milk, low-fat milk, whole milk, chocolate and strawberry flavor milk, cheese, cheese curds, eggnog, heavy cream, and buttermilk. Ninety percent of the milk stays on the farm to be processed and the remaining amount is sold to specialty processors who want a 'fresh from Florida' product. Dakin Dairy milk products are sold at the retail level throughout the state of Florida, the island of the Bahamas, and at the farm's onsite farm market.

Dakin Dairy Farms products have garnered strong local name recognition largely by being marketed through their website and social media connections, along with participation in county fairs, local school activities, community events, tournaments, youth programs, and other outdoor activities.

Dakin noted, "We are now a multi-generational sustainable farm, and people are drawn to environmentally friendly businesses. Therefore we promote the fact that we feed our livestock the forage grass we grow at the farm, recycle the used water for irrigation, and do our own processing on the farm so our milk goes from cow to grocery shelves in two days. Our mission is to produce superior quality, wholesome, farm-fresh dairy products from healthy cows, using environmentally sustainable practices and state-of-the-art methods."

Also located on the farm are Dakin Dairy Farm Market and Café, open to the public five days a week for breakfast and lunch. The market carries farm fresh produce as well as other local purveyors' products: honey, jams, sauces, and dressings. Visitors who'd like a souvenir of their visit or tour of the farm can take home a hat or T-shirt with the company's logo.

Recognizing the value of the natural soil on the land due to a steady stream of available compost, Dakin decided to create an additional business by selling the rich soil to landscapers and developers. Thus Dakin Natural Soils was established in 2008 and has grown to serve the needs of the community by providing topsoil, potting soil, structural fill dirt, and mulch. Other services include concrete recycling and debris disposal. The revenue from the dirt pit has helped sustain the farm during the past two years.

One way Dakin has practiced environmentally-friendly methods on his farm is composting, which plays a large role in sustainability. He applies composted manure to over 650 acres of grasses, reducing water usage and the need for fertilizer. He also cuts his grass twice daily to lower the risk of any pest damage and ensure his cows eat only healthy grass.

Dakin waters his grass with nutrient-rich water from the barn and continuously recycles the water captured in the final basins by using it to clean the floors of the barn and to water grasses. Dakin commented, "I believe these sustainable farming practices make a difference to the environment, product quality, and our farm's profitability. It means staying as close as possible to Mother Nature on every level."

Such practices go beyond the pasture; every barn on the farm has been designed to use gravity to clean the floors efficiently. The design captures sand, manure, and water in settling basins, which contents are recycled back into the farm. The sand is sanitized using solar energy and reused in the bars for cow bedding. Dakin said, "We also use fans and misters to keep the cows cool and comfortable in Florida's heat. It's essential

to keep the health and well-being of your herd as the top priority. We care deeply about our animals.”

Dakin Dairy Farms has encountered all the traditional challenges of farming, including multiple and sometimes burdensome layers (local, state, and national) of regulation, natural disasters, and personal setbacks that require the ability to adapt and grow to maintain profitability.

“We’re on a continual mission,” Dakin said, “to educate consumers and raise their level of awareness about the fact that only 1 percent of the people feed the other 99 percent. Also, Covid-19 brought our business to near collapse. Restaurants and stores stopped ordering; there were no workers to transport the milk to retail outlets; and cheese makers were cutting down as well as other processors.”

In the midst of this catastrophic atmosphere Dakin reached out to Publix, the largest supermarket chain in Florida, and informed them he would deliver milk. He also called Borden to see if they needed milk, and that was the beginning of both becoming regular customers of the dairy. To protect his employees and establish a safe working environment, Dakin also arranged for a mobile vaccine clinic to come to the farm and distribute vaccinations free of charge to anyone who wanted them, including families of workers.

He added, “I’m fortunate to have cousins work at the farm with me. Luke Dakin works with the cows; Courtney Dakin is our Tour Manager, running the agro-tourism side of the farm and handling our social media presence. My granddaughters are involved in 4-H with their pig and dairy projects. They’re keeping show steers at the farm and come regularly to take care of them and learn more about agriculture. Seeing the next generation of young people share in my passion for farming is truly rewarding.”

On the local county level, Jerry Dakin is a board member of the Manatee County Farm Bureau, a member of the Manatee County Cattlemen’s Association, and in 2020 received the Manatee County Agriculture Hall of Fame award. He is also a sponsor of all local FFA chapters and is a contributing member of Bayside, Hope Church, and Parrish Methodist. On the state level, Dakin serves on the dairy advisory committee of the Florida Farm Bureau. On the national level, Dakin has been a board member of the National Milk Federation, the Southeast Dairy Farmers Association, and the National Milk Producers Federation/National Cooperators Advisory Council.

As to future expansion, Dakin Dairy Farms presently uses automated packing equipment in its processing facility and plans to be fully automated with state-of-the-art technology by 2023. They’ve also been pursuing the approval and future use of MST (Millisecond Technology) pasteurization, a process that adds shelf life to milk without adding preservatives. It also maintains the vitamin integrity of the milk, unlike ultra-pasteurized products.

Dakin's goal to convert more of his milk into the retail market is on target. He reported, "Presently we have increased from 65 percent two years ago to 85 percent in retail markets. We also have a business partnership with a cheese maker to make his product with our milk here and are in talks with an ice cream company to create additional partnerships. It's a pleasure to meet and be involved with other entrepreneurs who expand and add value to our industry."

When Jerry Dakin wants to take a break from his daily farm routine, he goes on brisk morning walks and occasional extended weekend trips. He said, "I also love to fish and experience new things through travel. I've been fortunate to visit amazing places like Paris, Brazil, and Israel—the latter being my favorite destination up to this point."

More recently Dakin felt compelled to take a two-semester course in improvisational acting at the Florida Studio Theatre in Sarasota. He explained, "It was really an 'outside of the box' thing for me to do, but I wanted to learn how to communicate better with people, how to become a better listener and engage in meaningful conversations. It taught me to pay closer attention to what I was saying and to what others were saying. And it opened up my appreciation for the great people around me, the ones who have helped make my life meaningful and fulfilling. We all need to support and encourage one other to grow personally and thrive."

Jerry Dakin was nominated for the Florida Farmer of the Year award by Andy Neuhofer, District Field Supervisor at Florida Farm Bureau. He said, "One of Jerry's keen interests is involving and supporting young people in agricultural education projects and events through Farm Bureau programs and other organizations. He's also been a quiet but generous contributor, in terms of funds and product, to a number of local charities and events."

He added, "Jerry hosts students at his dairy farm, introducing many children of all ages to Florida farming and agritourism opportunities. He also serves the community through his fill dirt operation and his farm store and café that sell his and other farmers' products in a quaint atmosphere. He moves 100 percent of his own milk, using his own trucks, thereby ensuring quality and freshness."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Jerry Dakin, along with the other nine state winners via zoom at a later date this summer. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Joe West, Tifton, Georgia, retired dairy scientist and assistant Dean of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus.