Good afternoon ... and thanks for joining us ... I'm Judy Simpson. When a dairy farm in Shoreham was expanding its business to include drinkable yogurt, the owners needed support. That's where the Vermont Farm Viability program came into play. To learn more about the program and its positive impact on our economy, here's Across the Fence's Keith Silva:

Every bottle of Millborne Farm's drinkable yogurt is hand-labeled.

Gert Schut VO: “you see that the label is a little bit crooked than you can figure out it’s probably Gert that put that one on.”

Gert Schut and his wife Arda emigrated from the Netherlands in 1983 with the dream of owning their own farm. In January of 1999 that dream came true although they did receive an icy reception at first.

Arda Schut/Millbourne Farm: “Everything was sheer ice when we moved here with the trucks and the cows. The day we moved the cows in we were able to milk them that evening and get everything settled, but as I said that was definitely a challenge.”

Gert Schut/Millbourne Farm: “We really came over here to get into dairy farming and we started out with 40 cows, 80 cows, 120, you kind of get the picture and we're still a small farm by all measures, but maybe already a little bit bigger than we want to be.

As their business grew, the Schuts were faced with a decision: get bigger, get out, or go small and find a niche to fit their farm.

Schut: “We really like the cows, but more doesn’t really make it better and the other thing we kind of feel is that by adding cows all we do is chasing smaller and smaller margins with more and more animals. So, if you don’t want to add cows than what and that’s where the yogurt was born.

Drinkable yogurt has yet to catch on with consumers in the United States. Doctors and dieticians like drinkable yogurt because it’s a nutritious drink that has far less sugar and
calories than other on-the-go beverages. For the Schuts, the timing seemed right to introduce their made in Vermont product to the marketplace.

Schut: “When we started the yogurt, we created another business that other than the fact that we use our own milk has little or nothing to do with the farm. The biggest difference is probably the marketing end. As dairy farmers we don’t worry about it. We pay our 10 cents to the national dairy board or 15 cents and that’s where our marketing stops. By taking part of our milk and creating a value-added product now the marketing is up to us.

As if the challenge of marketing an unfamiliar product with little or no marketing experience wasn’t enough … the Schuts now found themselves running two businesses.

Schut: “We’re getting spread really thin trying to keep everything going and it’s very easy to go and make a pallet of yogurt for a couple thousand dollars and lose that same amount of money on the farm end if you don’t pay attention.”

Nat. Snd. [Al and Gert talking]

Schut contacted Al Curler a consultant with the University of Vermont Extension’s Vermont Farm Viability Program.

Al Curler/UVM Extension’s Vermont Farm Viability Program: “I’m a facilitator, I try to get them to think outside the box or give them ideas [...] you try to look at the resources that are here as opposed to try to do some big expansion or something like that. How can you generate income from the resources you already have.”

Schut: “It’s not so much that they give you the solutions on a piece of paper. Hey, do this and you’ll be O.K. It’s about asking the right questions to make you think.

Keith Silva/Across the Fence: “The farmers that Curler and his colleagues work with are all unique. Some like the Schuts are producing value-added products, others have an eye on expansion, and some need help transferring their farm-business to the next generation. One thing that many of Curler’s clients have in common is something they lack ... a formal, written business plan.

Curler: “A business plan is a living document it’s not something that you write and then set up on the shelf and that’s one of my goals on the business plans that I’ve done. I usually follow-up with those producers in three to six months or a year later or I’ve been following up on some that were done back in 2004 just to say, ‘well, how are things going should we update it or you know just talk about how the business is going.”

Schut: “We needed somebody to kind of hold our hand if you will and say O.K. make sure you don’t lose focus here make sure you don’t lose focus there. We really kind of needed a business plan. We were just kind of not just doing things by the seat of our pants, we certainly had a plan, but to actually sit down and write it out it’s a whole lot different than having a plan in your head.”

Arda Schut: “We get the help, we get the expertise, but we still have to do work. We got to implement the ideas that they’re coming up with. I mean it’s up to us to implement that and to make sure that we use, you know, the information properly and to have it benefit us. So, yes, that’s definitely still up to us.”
It’s said that what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger … and to that Gert agrees.

Schut: “It’s our fifth year, but were definitely still in the beginning stages. I guess the good news is lots of business don’t make a year even more businesses never make it 5 years so I like to think we got a little longevity here going, but we’re at that point where we know we got the whole processing part under control really well we kind of know what we’re doing in there.

Even if things look a little bit crooked … Millbourne Farm is headed in straight line toward success. In Shoreham, I'm Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Like other farmers across the state, the Schuts are also involved in an off-shoot of the Farm Viability program. Rebecca Gollin tells us now how the Schuts utilize Dairy Management Teams:

If two heads are better than one for solving problems, just imagine what 8 heads could do.

Gert Shute / Millborne Farms: “It’s almost like having your own board of directors.”

Gert Shute is a dairy farmer in Shoreham. He and his wife Arda milk around 160 cows and produce drinkable yogurt. They’re participating in the University of Vermont’s dairy management team program, which pairs farmers with a team of dairy management specialists.

Tony Kitsos / UVM Extension: “The dairy management team is a program that was developed to assist farmers in facilitating meetings that happen on their farm with their strategic planners.”

Dairy management teams are an offshoot of UVM Extensions farm viability program, which helps farmers develop and implement business plans. The Shutes were working on their business plan with UVM extension’s Al Curler as part of the farm viability program when he told them about the dairy management teams.

Gert : “The catalyst for it all was Al, al helped us with the business plan and the whole farm via thing, and then it was almost a natural extension to get into the dairy mgmt. team... Al is really aware of the challenges that we face here, again, being spread too thin, and it’s so easy to lose focus on very imp areas on the farm because we're 2 busy w the yogurt, and the other way around -
Al Curler / UVM Extension: “The DM team is there to help improve the bottom line of the business, they're looking at what things can maybe change, what little tweaks can we do to the business that will create opportunities.”

Nats, tony

Tony Kitsos runs the dairy management team program. The farmers who want to participate are looking to implement changes on their farm to grow or improve their business.

Kitsos: “I will sit down with the farmer and do a bit of an assessment as to what those goals are, try to understand who their key advisers are and who we should bring together at the table.”

With Kitsos, the farmer will identify a group of advisors that will become their dairy management team.

Kitsos: “They come from the lending community, usually it's a banker or some other financial adviser who is helping them put together budgets. There will be nutritionists that will be involved that are doing the feed programming and can help them with the herd health and making sure that those animals are moving in the right direction... there's oftentimes a veterinarian who is involved as well...

Once the farmer has identified their dairy management team, Kitsos will pair them with a volunteer facilitator. Mike Davis is the facilitator for the Shutes team.

Mike Davis / Volunteer Facilitator: “I organize the time and venue and people, take minutes, prepare agendas, but i work very closely with Gert ... because he's really in charge, i mean it's his farm, it's his future, it's his business, and it's my goal as the facilitator to take some of the workload, the meeting workload, off Gert.”

Davis worked for a large seed company in the Midwest before retiring to Vermont. With time on his hands and a desire to be connected with agriculture in his new home, Davis decided to get involved. He runs the meetings, and provides the organization, leaving the Shutes free to concentrate on their business.

Gert: “They're kind of the glue that holds the team together”
Davis: “I spent my career in business mgmt., in agriculture, so I’ve sat in a lot of meetings, I’ve organized a lot of meetings, and i think i know what it takes to make progress in a meeting, have some success and produce some results for Gert to use on the farm.”

Gert: “He always comes out to the farm if there's something special is happening so he can report back to everybody... maybe they're all this good, but we're really happy with Mike Davis”

Nats, Shute farm

Bill Kipp /Dairy Nutrition Consultant: “A long time ago we saw value in this type of program. Farmers by nature are very independent, and i don't think it’s intuitive of them to seek out a team to help them run their business.”

Bill Kipp is a dairy nutrition consultant based out of Middlebury.

Kipp says that the Shutes, like many dairy producers, recognize that they need to move from thinking about farming as a lifestyle, to thinking about it as a business.

Kipp: “Farming is very competitive, we have competition from all over, within the us and outside the us, we have issues in terms of land values, property taxes, weather, our growing season, labor costs, it's an intensely competitive business with very very low margins. It requires a skill set across many areas, not just cows and tractors, this business requires a very good businessman...”

Arda Shute/ Millborne Farms: “Sometimes you get so stuck focusing on certain issues that u forget that there's other ways out of it and somebody can give you advice and say 'hey maybe if u handle it this way it might help' and i think that’s been a huge advantage of this whole DM team”

David Girard USDA farm loan officer: “I was invited to be part of the team from a lender point of view...”

Another advantage of a dairy management team is the increased awareness of what each member of the team brings to the table.

Girard: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and by having this forum, it brings us all together and we gain a greater insight into what each other’s part is and how it ultimately benefits the farm.”
The Shutes plan for their farm business is to improve their operation in the short term, and continue to manage it to ensure that it remains successful for the long-term.

Davis: “A dairy mgmt. team is not meant to be a permanent establishment. We hope that we will make contributions to Gert’s business plan, and to his mgmt. strategies that just become part of the process, so that at some point, the formal dairy mgmt. team and maybe my facilitation would disappear,”

Gert: “We still make the final call, they can’t make us do anything - maybe some people wouldn’t like to have that, looking over your shoulder type, but i think that i really need it, it helps me focus, it’s sort of another group of people I’m responsible towards to get the job done.”

Just a few meetings in, the Shutes have already implemented changes on the farm.

Gert: “We changed a few things with the crop work, what we do and what we don't do anymore - again, it's so hard to focus with yogurt, cows, crop work,”

And although changes don’t happen too fast on the farm, the advantages of having a dairy management team were clear to the Shutes from the start.

Gert: “The power of having 8 minds focused on 1 issue is tremendous”

Helping improve dairy farm businesses in Vermont, UVM extension’s dairy management team program has its sights set on the bottom line. In Shoreham, I'm Rebecca Gollin with Across the Fence.

Judy.: In the time we have remaining, we're going to learn about a forestry program that's focused on trees in Vermont's most urban area. Keith Silva tells us about Branch-Out Burlington.

warren spinner is the Burlington's city arborist.

The tree looks good I can see where it's had a little Japanese beetle activity that that's really insignificant.

Spinner and his colleagues at the Burlington Parks and recreation department manage the trees that line the city streets and beautify Burlington’s Parks and public spaces.
We have about 10,000 trees that are on public property that includes between curb and sidewalk and in our Parks plus the bike path the northern connector. So we're dealing with trees everywhere.

Since 1996 Skinner has been helped out by branch out Burlington. Volunteer organization that helps plants and care for many of the city's trees.

We can't be in all places at all times and the more people that are educated to look at the trees and see where issues may occur it helps because they can call us and we know exactly where to go and what to look for and it's a great benefit to us.

Margaret what kind of trees are these here?

These are Dutch elm disease resistant trees.

The trees used by Branch-Out Burlington are raised at the Burlington community nursery.

I take care of each one of these trees individually over their life in the nursery for two or three years and each one of them is like one of my children.

Skinner's efforts to place trees in good homes has taken root and budded into the tree keeper program.

We try to link people who want rese in front of their house with the trees we have available. What a treat keeper is expected to is to come to a training session a 2 hour training session in the early spring so they know exactly what to do and how to do it and then when the trees get planted they would help water the trees for least the year or maybe two years. We want the people who get these trees to really be invested in them just the way I'm invested in them now.

It's an investment made today have that's guaranteed to grow tomorrow. In Burlington I'm Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Thanks, Keith ... and thank you for joining us. I'm Judy Simpson ... I'll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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