

Getting to Know NAJ Director Mike Wickstrom

National All-Jersey Inc. (NAJ) Director Mike Wickstrom, Hilmar, Calif., is serving his second term as District 2 Director. He was first elected to serve in 2009.

Wickstrom and his family operate three Registered Jersey operations—Wickstrom Jersey Farms Inc., Wickstrom Brothers and Red Top Jerseys. The dairies milk a combined 8,500 cows and ship milk to Hilmar Cheese Company. The farming enterprise encompasses 1,800 acres, which are double-cropped each year with corn silage and another winter forage.

After graduation from California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo in 1983 with a bachelor's degree in dairy science, Wickstrom returned home to dairy in partnership with his father, Duane, and brother, Scott, at the home farm, Wickstrom Jersey Farms. He established Wickstrom Brothers with Scott in 1999 and Red Top Jerseys in partnership with Duane and Scott and Delton, Lloyd and Brad Nyman in 2007. The Wickstrom started 140 Cattle Company, a heifer-raising facility in neighboring Livingston, with the Nymans and Chuck and Mark Ahlem in 2012.

All three Wickstrom-owned dairies are enrolled on REAP, use JerseyTags with RFID for permanent identification and JerseyMate in the mating program. Wickstrom Jerseys is a charter member of Project Equity.

Wickstrom Jersey Farms has a 2014 lactation average of 23,193 lbs. milk, 1,144 lbs. fat and 833 lbs. protein on 1,889 cows. The lactation average for Wickstrom Brothers is 22,926 lbs. milk, 1,065 lbs. fat and 823 lbs. protein on 393 cows. Red Top Jerseys has a lactation average of 23,813 lbs. milk, 1,069 lbs. fat and 858 lbs. protein on 3,759 cows. All dairies rank among the top 10 in the nation for all measures of production among similar-sized herds. All dairies also rank among the top 50 herds in the nation for genetic merit with herd average JPIs over +48.

Mike and Scott received the AJCA Young Jersey Breeder Award in 1988.

Wickstrom Jersey Farms LLC is a charter member of both Equity and REAP. Why did you feel it important to support Equity when it was adopted in 1976 and REAP when it was introduced in 1995?

We supported both programs initially and have continued with them over the long haul because they make financial sense for us as Jersey breeders. In the early 1970s, Jersey milk was being underpriced in most milk markets, including ours in California. We weren't being paid fairly for our high-component milk, which yielded more product than average milk. Project Equity was a way for us to combine resources with other Jersey breeders to change the way Jersey milk was being priced in the market place. Multiple component pricing promoted through the Equity program has helped Jersey dairies real-

ize the profits they deserve and been a catalyst for the breed growth we see today.

Our support of REAP goes hand-in-hand with Jerseyland Sires, which we officially established with 12 other Hilmar Jersey breeders in 1979. In order to prove our bulls, it was a must for us to collect good data—identification, production and type—on sire daughters. The REAP program offered an economical way for us to get the data we needed and incorporate several programs we were already using, or would begin using, at a discounted rate and a price point that declined per cow as cow numbers increased.

What benefits do you get from using REAP today?

Our Equity investment as one of the four components of REAP continues to benefit us. NAJ testified at the California federal order hearing on behalf of Jersey producers. NAJ documented the importance of pricing protein separately from nonfat solids and the impact that protein has on the yields of most dairy products manufactured in California. NAJ also testified against proposals that would be detrimental to milk prices for most Jersey producers. NAJ is currently working to get component pricing adopted in the southeast too.

Equity gives Jersey producers a presence in Washington D.C. Contracted lobbyists and NAJ staff are always watching for legislation that could potentially impact our industry and working on bills that support our cause.

Registration is the basis for capitalizing on high-end animals. We have placed several bulls in A.I. service and marketed females in elite national sales. As well, private treaty sales to dairy producers across the United States account for a regular part of our cash flow.

The identification of the top females in our herds, through registration and genomic testing, has been the basis for an in-vitro fertilization (IVF) program we started in September 2014. To date, we have 83 IVF calves on the ground and 130 pregnancies due from the top 1% of our herd.

What other AJCA-NAJ programs do you use and why?

We use JerseyTags on all the dairies for visual identification and RFID for herd management. Tags are applied at birth and almost all activities of the animal from birth through culling are tracked by scanning the RFID and sending the information directly to the computer. The RFID JerseyTags allow us to monitor everything, from pen location to vaccination status to daily milk weights.

JerseyMate is another program we have used since its inception in 2001. The tool is a very efficient and systematic way to mate several thousand animals, several times a year. We use JerseyMate for the every animal in the herds—cows and heifers alike. Over the past four

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NAJ Director Mike Wickstrom and his family operate three Registered Jersey dairies in Hilmar, Calif. The dairies milk a combined 8,500 cows and ship milk to Hilmar Cheese Company. The dairies are enrolled on REAP and utilize a number of program tools to manage the herd and prove young bulls for Jerseyland Sires.

Mike Wickstrom

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years, we've been able to increase JPI, milk yield and Productive Life, all while reducing inbreeding.

Why did you decide to become a director for NAJ?

I have always enjoyed serving on various boards and the opportunity to work with fellow Jersey breeders from across the country was one I couldn't pass up. It is very rewarding to work with owner-processors and breeders with different-sized and different-managed herds on a common goal—to increase demand for Jersey cattle and Jersey milk. Because we are a relatively small, unrepresented group, our pooled resources through NAJ are critical for increasing demand through milk pricing and policies and market development.

What other organizations have you served?

I am currently president of Jerseyland Sires. I have also served as president, vice president and director of the California Jersey Cattle Association and am past vice president of the Central Counties Dairy Herd Improvement Association. I am a former dairy representative for the California Beef Council and served as the organization's budget chair for two years.

In the Hilmar community, I have volunteered as a firefighter, sat on boards of various recreation groups and been a 4-H leader.

How has the dairy industry and your business changed over the past 30 years?

New and emerging technologies have changed the face of the dairy business. Computerized feeding programs, on-farm milk meters, electronic identification, sex-sorted semen, genomic testing and robotic milkers are a few of the commonplace, technological advances now available to dairy producers that didn't even exist a few decades ago.

By incorporating new and improved technology, we have been able to grow the herds to meet the needs of a growing family business. Following incorporation of the family farm in 1980, when Scott and I joined the operation, we increased the herd at Wickstrom Jersey Farms from 700 to 1,200 cows and then allowed the herd to expand from internal growth to 1,500 cows. In 1995, Scott and I started Wickstrom Brothers Dairy on a leased facility, starting with 200 cows and growing the herd to its present size of 500 cows. In 2007, when another generation expressed interest in returning to the farm after college, Red Top Dairy was established in a partnership with the Nyman family. That facility has grown from 1,400 cows to 6,500 cows today.

In 2009, Wickstrom Jersey Farms underwent a major remodel of the milking facility. The old herringbone parlor was replaced with a 60 stall rotary parlor. Another 300 cows were added at that point and we began milking three times daily. Technology allowed us to decrease overall milking time even though an additional milking was being done and more cows were being milked.

What do you see as opportunities for Jersey cows and Jersey milk in the future?

I am excited about the future of the breed because recent research proves something we've known all along—the Jersey cow is the breed best suited to meet the growing world demand for dairy. Studies like Jude Capper's carbon footprint study, showing that Jersey milk for cheese production saves resources and reduces environmental impact, are recent opportunities to promote the Jersey advantage to consumers and dairy producers milking other dairy cattle. Continuing and new research funded by NAJ on topics such as Jersey beef and Jersey dairy crosses, will surely lead to other discoveries and opportunities to promote the Jersey cow as well.

And if we can continue to develop the advantages that have gotten us here—the right sized cow, with the right components, super reproduction and longevity—the demand for Registered Jerseys will continue to grow.

We know we're on the right track because I haven't heard of many, if any, Jersey producers wanting to switch to Holsteins in recent years.