

Van Exel Named Dairyman of the Year

World Dairy Expo has named Hank Van Exel, Lodi, Calif., as the Dairyman of the Year. The award is presented annually to a dairy producer whose operation excels in efficient production and the breeding of quality dairy animals, adopts progressive management practices and has a history of achievement.

Van Exel owns and operates Exel Holsteins and Jerseys with his wife, Carolyn, and their grown children. The fully-registered herd is 1,500 head of Holsteins and 300 head of Jerseys. Cattle are raised on three different farms in the Central Valley, halfway between Sacramento and Modesto. The Van Exels also farm 2,360 acres, growing all their own feed and selling excess as cash crops. One hundred acres are set aside to grow grapes for the region's thriving wine industry.

The second-generation dairy farmer has taken to heart the goal of bettering a business established by his late parents, Adam and Pietje Van Exel. Van Exel focuses on production, type and longevity in the breeding program. Genetics developed over the past three decades have impacted herds across the globe through sales of semen, embryos and live animals.

Van Exel is also widely recognized for his keen eye as a dairy cattle judge. His assignments have taken him to shows and state fairs across this country and abroad to Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Japan, Mexico and Switzerland. He has served as the official at the All American Jersey Show twice and as associate two other times. Van Exel also judged Jerseys and Holsteins at World Dairy Expo and has been the official for national shows in Canada (Royal Agriculture Winter Fair) and Australia (International Dairy Week).

Van Exel grew up on a 60-cow, grade Holstein dairy purchased by his parents when they emigrated from Holland after World War II. He began developing his own herd of cattle like many farm kids, as 4-H and FFA youth projects, but caught the bug for the business through an endeavor in which he was especially adept—judging. He graduated from high school in 1972 and then studied dairy science at California Polytechnic State University, where he judged for the university team and earned

top honors at the contest held during the Pacific International Dairy Show. In his fourth year at Cal Poly, he was called back home after his father had a heart attack and could no longer operate the farm on his own. A year later, learning herd management through trial-by-fire, Hank assumed full responsibility for the cattle while his father focused on the crops.



Though Van Exel credits his father for the adoption of many early, progressive management practices—like the creation of self-locking stanchions, breeding artificially and balancing feed rations by group—the practice of registration and participation in breed improvement programs were Hank's notions. Van Exel has capitalized on the opportunities the practices offer to merchandise cattle and improve the genetics of the herd. There have been other management changes at Exel Dairy as well, all with a mindset of breeding a better cow, improving the land and boosting the bottom line.

Cows are housed in compost pack barns with headlocks on the three facilities and milked in a rapid-exit, double-20 parallel parlor, a rapid-exit, double-18 parallel parlor or a pair of double-12 herringbone parlors. All heifers are raised on the farm as well.

Exel Dairy is frequently toured by dignitaries, government officials and allied industry, in part because of its environmental stewardship practices. The

dairy deployed an anaerobic digestion system in 2005 and is environmentally certified under the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program.

It was a judging engagement at the Ferndale County Fair in 1992 that brought Van Exel and Jerseys together for the first time. That day, he fell in love with the animals he tapped as Grand Champion, Reserve Grand Champion and Junior Champion of the Jersey show. He made an offer on them and two additional head exhibited by the Lourenzo family of Tillamook, Ore., and went home a Jersey breeder. He purchased additional foundation animals for his Jersey herd and began shipping milk to Hilmar Cheese to take advantage of the company's component premiums.

The Jersey herd is enrolled on REAP and has a 2014 herd average of 21,857 lbs. milk, 977 lbs. fat and 767 lbs. protein on 211 cows. The lactation average of 22,881 lbs. milk, 1,037 lbs. fat and 817 lbs. protein ranks second in the nation for milk, sixth for fat and fourth for protein among herds with 150-299 cows. The Van Exel herd has ranked nationally among similar-sized herds five of the past seven years, topping its peers for milk and protein in 2013. With the latest appraisal, in April 2015, the herd includes 59 Excellent and 215 Very Good cows and has an average of 84.4%. Five cows are appraised Excellent-93%.

The performance of the Holstein milking string is equally impressive, with a rolling herd average of 32,827 lbs. milk, 1,046 lbs. fat and 974 lbs. protein. The herd includes 152 Excellent and 477 Very Good cows. Fifteen cows have earned the Gold Medal Dam award and eight have been named Dams of Merit.

Even though Van Exel is known for his judging prowess, he has been on the lead end of the halter with cattle that have caught the eyes of his peers as well. He showed the winner of the 2003 National Jersey Jug Futurity (Excels Success 954, Excellent-92%), the Reserve Grand Champion of the 2000 Central National Jersey Show (Hilmar Bumble Bee Missy, Excellent-95%) and the Grand Champion of the California Jersey Show six times. The Van Exels bred the Reserve Junior Champion of the 2010 All American Jersey

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Show (Exels Carrier Polly 2109), who traces to Renzo Playboy Poly, Excellent-94%, among the five head initially purchased by Van Exel.

Over the years, 30 Holsteins have been nominated All-American and one was tapped Reserve Grand Champion at World Dairy Expo. As well, the Van Exels have earned the Premier Exhibitor banner at the California Holstein Show five times.

Van Exel is also active in service off the farm. He is a member of Western United Dairymen, San Joaquin County DHIA, Farm Bureau and Woodbridge Irrigation District and Reclamation Water District. He has chaired the legislative affairs and national show committees for Holstein Association USA and also served on the organization's national executive and type advisory committees. For many years, he sat on the board of the California Holstein Association, which presented him with the A.J. Quest Memorial Breeder Award and the Senior Breeder Award. He also received the Al Hayes Award from the Western National Show and the Senior Breeder Award from the California Jersey Cattle Club.

Van Exel is a long-time supporter of the state FFA organization, volunteered as a local 4-H leader for 12 years and coached boys and girls baseball, basketball and soccer. He has been an active member of the Zion Reformed Church.

His own career and service aside, Van Exel may be more proud of the fact that his children, Adam, Jennifer and Sarah, and their spouses and children, have been able to join in the operation of the farm, lend a hand with farm chores and enjoy family vacations showing cattle. Adam and Lacey and their children, Madison and Atlee, live on the farm. Jennifer and her husband, Brian Dongelmans, operate a Boumatic dealership. They have two children, Stella and Bryce. Sarah is active with the Young Farmer Program and writes for dairy publications such as *Cowsmopolitan*. Her husband, Jarrett Zonneveld, is a semen salesperson for Alta Genetics. They have three children, Jackson, Reagan and Rhett.

Van Exel will be recognized at World Dairy Expo's annual Dinner with the Stars on September 30, 2015, in Madison, Wis.