

Butler Oaks Dairy

One of the best things about being the Natural Resources Specialist for the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District is getting out and meeting the local producers. The men and women that manage land have their work cut out for them. It is not an easy life, but somehow, they all seem to enjoy what they do, love the land and are happy to share their experiences with others.

That is the case with Bob and Pam Butler of Butler Oaks Dairy. Upon touring their farm, one can see that the Butler's care about their animals, the environment, their community and the consumers that they provide for. Dairy farming is not an easy business and the Butlers have had their share of challenges. But even after three hurricanes, they carry on. After assessing the damage on the dairy from the 2004 storms, most folks might have given up. The Butler family decided to turn lemons into lemonade and rebuild better and stronger than ever.

Often, people may not understand how much hard work goes into food production. Where would we be without dairies and those who manage them? Milk and dairy products don't just magically appear on the grocery store shelves. In Bob Butler's own words, "the consumer needs to understand what it takes to sustain land from generation to generation." Bob Butler is a third generation farmer and proud of it. His dedication to the land, animals and their care has been the driving force behind his success.

By using best management practices such as an intense water quality program, free-stall barns, and a self-contained waste-handling system the Butlers are an inspiration and a good example for others to follow. By partnering with South Florida Water Management District, the Farm Pilot Project Coordination, Inc. and the Florida Department of Agriculture in the conversion from the traditional dairy to the new technological advances, cost share programs have assisted him with his efforts to continue on with his commitment to conserving the environment.

Neighbor and brother, Roger Butler is also involved in some of the practices on Butler Oaks Dairy. For example, the storm water management system is shared by both farms. The system has been designed to capture and contain all of the surface water runoff through a series of ditches and ponds which are strategically located on both properties. It is then reused on the farms to irrigate pastures, which reduces the need for any groundwater.

The dairy also has an alum plant, which treats any storm and wastewater for phosphorus removal before it leaves the property. The water leaving the area would then be clearer and the amount of phosphorus leaving the property would be greatly reduced. The reuse of the water is important not only for water conservation, but to improve the quality of the water before it reaches the Kissimmee River, which flows into Lake Okeechobee.

"A happy cow gives more milk." That's the philosophy of Bob Butler. And his cows certainly seem to be happy. In a free-stall barn equipped with fans and misters for cooling, sand beds for lying down and plenty of food and water, what cow wouldn't be happy? The free-style barns allow the waste from the animals to be collected and reused in compost, which is a wonderful soil amendment. The wastewater is collected and reused to irrigate hay pastures. The hay then feeds the cows and they cycle starts all over again.

The products produced by the agricultural industry range from the materials our houses are built from, the clothes on our backs and the food that we eat. Ask yourself the question that Bob Butler thinks about every day. If America can't produce enough food and products for our people, do we really want to depend on other countries to provide for us?

Bob Butler believes in what he does. The Butlers care about the land, the animals and the people that they provide dairy products for. So next time you sit down at the dinner table, try to remember all the hard work that went into the meal that you are about to eat. Appreciate that the structure you live in was provided by folks who cared enough to provide the wood and other products. Agriculture is not an easy business. It is hard work and with today's high prices for fuel, feed, fertilizer and other supplies that go into running a farm, we need to be grateful that these folks continue to stay the course.