

## Our Featured Customers

State: Connecticut

Featured Customer: Robin and Lincoln Chesmer

Date: February 2008



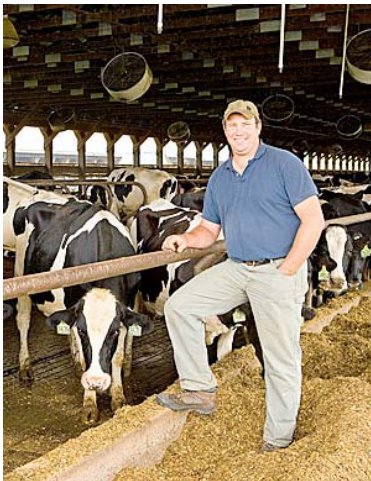
### Meet the Chesmers

*Connecticut*

Graywall Farms is owned and operated by Robin Chesmer and his son Lincoln. The pair, who entered the dairy business in 1989 without formal training, has managed to build their farm into one of the state's finest dairy operations. They credit their success to hard work, a strong conservation ethic, creative marketing, and wise management decisions.

### Preserving Farmland for the Future

A key component to their success is the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program (the state PDR Program), which made their first farmland purchase possible. In the beginning, the Chesmer's leased the operating farm and purchased the cows and equipment. Several years later, the owner sold the development rights to the state, making it possible for them to purchase the land at its agricultural value. Since then, they have used the PDR Program (which also utilized FRPP funds) two more times to expand their farm; and purchased additional cropland that was already protected. Today, Graywall Farm boasts 400 dairy cows, as well as 350-head young stock on 800 acres – with over 500 acres permanently protected.



### Protecting Our Natural Resources

Nearly \$1 million has been invested in conservation through landowner contributions and NRCS technical and cost-share assistance. "The conservation practices we have implemented not only provide environmental benefits, but have improved the efficiencies of daily operations," said Robin Chesmer, "which is of significant economic benefit to our farm."



The Chesmers have installed practices to protect water quality, keep the soils healthy and productive, improve air quality and animal health and welfare, as well as save money and allow them to be good neighbors. These practices include a conservation cropping system, diversions, forage harvest management, strip cropping, waste storage facilities, silage leachate collection, manure transfer, sediment basin, solids separator, and a runoff management system. And their commitment to riparian buffers along streams and wetlands, and management of woodlands support habitat for many species.

Graywall Farm's latest conservation practice is a windbreak established this spring adjacent to the manure storage facility. The Chesmers turned the project into a learning experience for students from the Yale School of Forestry. About 60 students were looking for an opportunity to participate in planting trees and shrubs. The

windbreak turned into a win-win situation as the activity (and a farm tour) gave the students the experience they were looking for, and was a great benefit to the farm.

### **Educating and Promoting Local Products**

A few years ago, the Chesmers joined several farms and agricultural businesses to start a group called Very Alive (a nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion of agriculture.). "We all felt that agriculture wasn't put forth in a positive light in Connecticut, and we knew we wanted to be around for the long haul and promote farmland preservation," said Robin Chesmer. "We wanted to improve our businesses and our management skills. Out of this group came the nucleus of The Farmer's Cow," he said.

The Farmer's Cow is a small group of dairy farmers from eastern Connecticut who joined forces to market their milk on a cooperative basis. "We can take advantage of that huge consumer base that's right at our doorstep," said Robin Chesmer. "When you think about it, the marketplace between Boston and New York is one of the largest consumer markets in the world. And we as dairy farmers have been taking absolutely no advantage of that. We found an extremely enthusiastic response to our initiative to market milk. And it started before we even came up with this project. During farm tours, we'd have families come and ask 'where can we buy your milk?' We could never directly say, because we were never really sure where our milk went," he said. "There's a huge interest in local. And in our case, the advantage we have is we're the source. We're the farmers. And you can actually come and visit us. You can come to the farm and see where and how your milk is produced. We think that's a big advantage. We can let people know where their food comes from," said Robin Chesmer.

### **Passionate About the Land**

The Chesmers have an overwhelming love for the land and for farming. "I wasn't brought up in agriculture," said Robin Chesmer. "I was actually born in England and had exposure to a dairy farm at a very young age. I loved it and ever since, I wanted to be a farmer when I grew up. And here I am," he said, "I grew up and I'm a dairy farmer." He adds, "The land we rent is beautiful and the land we own is beautiful. You get half a mile off the road and you're looking back at scenery across the valley. We'll go out and mow hay together and it's fun. Some people have a motorboat or something. We go around the field mowing hay and it's a pleasure. And as you're mowing, there are hawks and wildlife and coyotes. There are all sorts of things. It's an uplifting experience."

"This land is important to me, and to my family," said Lincoln Chesmer. "It's a unique opportunity for my children to have this land and be able to continue farming in the future," he said.

Chesmer has been an untiring advocate for conservation, and an ambassador for Connecticut agriculture. His contributions include: Founding Member - Working Lands Alliance (a grassroots farmland preservation organization); Member - Board of Directors, Connecticut Farmland Trust; Founding Member - Celebrating Agriculture, an annual educational exposition that supports conservation and working lands; Host - 2006 Tour of National Council of State Legislators (to support their interest in farmland and food policy); Member - Eastern Connecticut RC&D Agriculture Committee; Assisted American Farmland Trust with analysis of Conservation Security Program impacts on northeast agriculture; Hosted 2002 visit from Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman.

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## Honors and Awards

- Connecticut Dairy Farm of Distinction, 1991
- Connecticut Dairy Farm of the Year, New England Green Pasture Program, 1998
- Pathfinder Award for efforts in farmland preservation, 2003
- Nominee American Farmland Trust Steward of the Land Award, 2002
- RC&D Partnership Award, 2007

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