



Featured Farmer: Rolland Rainville, Rolland Dairy Farm, Franklin

Author: Lindsey Ruhl

Introduction

To get to know the FWA membership, we are highlighting an FWA member and their good work! In this article, our featured farmer is Roll-Land Rainville of Rolland Dairy Farm in Franklin, Vermont. Rolland comes from a French-Canadian farming family that is on its fourth generation of farming in Franklin County around Lake Carmi (Image 1). Rolland is family and community oriented. He is teaching his three nephews how to run the farm and has served on his local Planning Commission, serves on an agricultural advisory committee for Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Anson Tebbetts, and is a board member of the Farmer's Watershed Alliance. Rolland also collaborates with UVM Extension's Northwest Crops and Soils Program for cover crop research and an assessment of whole farm mass nutrient balance.



Image 1. Rolland (right) with his mother & nephews.

Over 40 Years of Stewardship

Rolland has put in a lot of hard work, time, and patience to get the farm where it is today. He takes great pride and great pleasure in making land productive. And for nearly forty years, he has been doing something different to make the land more productive. He maintains a healthy forest stand to tap trees to produce maple syrup. He's squared the fields to utilize the space more effectively. He's leveled fields to reduce puddling which stunts plant growth and lowers quality. He grows his own grain and soy which means those nutrients are cycled in the watershed from plant to cow back to the field as manure instead of importing the nutrients in. He no-tills and cover crops where and when he can and promotes these agricultural practices with Vermont Associate of Conservation District signs (Image 2 and Image 3). He created a nutrient management plan that follows our states strict standards and updates it every year to reflect changes on his farm. This year, he is trying out a few acres of hemp. For the past four years, the only fertilizer he has applied has been fish oil. He knows the lack of fertilizer means that his crops "aren't the best out there, but I get a lot out of it." And he's excited about manure injection, which reduces the risk of run-off into waterways, and significantly minimizes odor.



Image 2. Field where Rainville grows cover crops.



Image 3. Corn field where Rainville no-tills.



When I asked Rolland what gave him the most pride on his farm, he pointed toward a nearby meadow. He made that meadow from poorly producing pasture into high yielding, high quality hay land with good land stewardship and picking up loads, literally loads, of stones. Rolland jokes, “We can spend days picking up stones and sometimes when I’m done I think I’ve dropped the field six inches.” However, he also says, “Where there are stones, this is good land...the land makes you work for it.”

But the early mornings and late days bring their joys too. He smiles and says, “I love my cows...there’s nothing like seeing a cow mature, a calf being born...a new life, a new chance, a new future.” The care that Rolland puts into his work shows that he values where he lives and works. “We are doing the best job we can do. We are treating our land good because if we don’t, we won’t have a farm.” Rolland says, “I spent most of my lifetime fixing land...it’s mine to take care of while I’m here...I’d like to think I did a good job while I was here.” Rolland appreciates the elegance of the Lake Carmi area, “you couldn’t ask for better scenery, it’s a beautiful part of the world.”

It’s that mentality that keeps Rolland at it every day of the week and helps him through the hard times like low milk prices and weather like that of this past spring. This spring was unusually cold and rainy which meant that crops got planted later than they typically do, impacting feed yield and quality, which leads to lower milk productivity, and that means less income. Back in May, Rolland noted, “It’s going to be another challenging year...there’s no right or wrong thing to do anymore...just plugging away and hope for the best. It’s not your fault if you get three inches of rain. You put your pants back on and do something different.”

The poor weather conditions just compound the four years of poor dairy prices. Rolland reflects that when he first bought the farm in 1976, the first check of the month went to bills and the second check of the month went back into investing the farm. Now, the price farmers receive for what they produce is often not enough to cover basic costs of operation. Milk is the second most commonly bought item at the grocery store, and as Rolland notes, “we can’t make a living off of it.” Coming from a long line of dairy farmers, Rolland is not the first to farm in his family, but he wonders if he will be the last. With this dire foreboding, I ask Rolland why he doesn’t get out of farming and enjoy life. His response; “I am enjoying life. I will do this to my dying day...it’s life. It’s what I do.”



Image 4. View of Lake Carmi from Rainville’s hay field.