

'It was a great phone call to get'

New producers offered opportunity to pursue dreams

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In July, the BC Milk Marketing Board selected four finalists in this year's New Entrant Program.

The finalists include Lindsey Dirks from Abbotsford, Jared Romeyn from Chilliwack, Jonathan Wouda from Chilliwack and Dionne and Clinton Quesnel from Lumby. All entrants plan to be operational before the end of 2025.

BCMMB's committee interviewed nine candidates picked at random this spring from 30 applicants.

The finalists are eligible to receive 15kgs of Continuous Daily Quota (CDQ) as incentive quota to start milk production, plus up to 8kgs of matching CDQ provided on a 1:1 ratio basis during the 10 years of the program.



Lindsey Dirks

Finalist Lindsey Dirks grew up on a dairy and broiler farm in Sumas Prairie, which was sold just after he graduated high school. "I was involved in that since I was a kid, doing work on the farm. So, I got a lot of experience working with animals and operating farm equipment growing up," Dirks says.

Dirks began working for a local trucking company, hauling feed to producers across the province. With his entrepreneurial spirit and network in the agricultural industry, Dirks decided to branch off on his own. "About four years ago I decided to start my own business selling grain and hay and we've got a couple of our own trucks on the road,"

he says. His company transports grain and hay throughout BC and Alberta as well as provides custom grain mixes for local producers.

As his business, Dirks Grain Inc. grew, Dirks has always had the goal to return to primary production if the opportunity presented itself. Fortunately, he and his wife Sydney were able to purchase a farm in Abbotsford last year that has a dairy facility. The next step was to acquire quota, which the NEP will provide for his young family.

While their two daughters are under the age of six, they have already shown interest in the cows and Dirks is proud to soon provide his children with the lifestyle and environment that he was privileged to be raised in.

At the time of writing, Dirks had some bred heifers and was custom raising cattle for another dairy farm in the Fraser Valley. He hopes to start milking Jerseys in the fall. "But we could go Holstein. It kind of depends on what we can find for cows," he says.

Dirks looks forward to getting back into farming and balancing his two enterprises. "It's kind of an opportunity to make our farm that we bought sustainable for the next 20 years or more," Dirks says. "It's pretty hard these days to get started. So, for us it works out because we have a facility here and we have our existing grain and hay business that can carry it along to get it started and then hopefully keep growing it down the road."



Dionne and Clinton Quesnel

First-generation dairy farmers and finalists Dionne and Clinton Quesnel from Lumby are well on their way to running a diverse family operation.

While the Quesnells have managed a beef herd for the last five generations, a local's retirement from the dairy sector opened the door to expanding their operation in a new direction. "A neighbour basically leased out his quota and was shutting down his operation. Dionne had spotted a couple of Brown Swiss cows in his barn that he didn't have a home for initially and so we spoke for those," Clinton says. Their herd quickly grew from two to 20 milking cows.

Dionne did not grow up on a farm and had zero agricultural experience before meeting Clinton a decade ago. Now, she is ready to take on the role as dairy

herd manager. They will start out by renting their neighbour's barn. "Short term it works out really well for us to start there and continue on that organic growth path," Clinton says. "We don't have a dairy pedigree, so we're fortunate we have neighbors that definitely helped mentor us."

The Quesnells were unsuccessful in their first NEP application last year and, at the time, were devastated. It turns out that a year's deferral was a blessing in disguise. "We just thought, well, let's try it again and see what happens and by luck, our names got drawn. We took it as an opportunity," Dionne says.

For the last year, Dionne has worked at a dairy farm to gain more experience in milking and herd management to ensure dairying was undeniably something she wanted to pursue long term. "I ended up falling in love with it even more," Dionne says. "Mostly I think our passion for wanting to do it grew bigger and the

committee saw that."

In this new endeavour, which includes simultaneously running beef and dairy herds, Clinton and Dionne have valued the opportunity to learn from their beef and dairy farming counterparts to improve both operations. "The dairy and beef guys strengthen each other. I think the dairy protocols are going to make us better beef producers and vice versa. I think they do work really well together," says Clinton.

Overall, the Quesnells are well on their way to a thriving Jersey milking herd. They are excited to get started and bring a different lens to the sector. "We're definitely appreciative of the committee selecting us and having confidence in us and I think we certainly impressed upon them our commitment to being part of it and to grow and develop and offer some creativity and outside of the box thinking," Clinton says.

They hope their two boys will be the sixth generation to farm in the North Okanagan.



Jared Romeyn

Chilliwack's Jared Romeyn is thrilled to be named a finalist and get his start in the dairy industry following a previous attempt two years ago to make it through the NEP application and interview process. "I'm very excited. It was a great phone call to get."

Romeyn grew up on a dairy farm that was sold when he was a child, but over the years, he has remained closely connected

to the sector. "When I was 11, I started working at a dairy farm down the road feeding calves, which progressively led to me to start milking there, which I did until I was 18," Romeyn says. He then pursued a career as a heavy-duty mechanic, specializing in agricultural equipment while raising beef calves on the side.

Moving forward, Romeyn and his brother Kevin will farm together. They currently have between 30 and 40 beef cows and will look to milk a mix of Holsteins and

Jerseys as early as they can get started next year. Their other brother William also has a dairy farm, which he got off the ground as a finalist of the first iteration of the NEP in 2019.

"It's been my dream for as long as I can remember, so to have my own farm is going to be fantastic," Romeyn says. "I can't wait and I'm hoping to grow it to the point where I don't have to work off farm anymore. I can be full time on the farm and just live that farming lifestyle that I've always wanted."

Jonathan Wouda

Spending his childhood on the dairy farm naturally led finalist Jonathan Wouda to a career in the sector. While his family exited primary production when he was 18, Wouda has since been longing to get back into milking and livestock management. "My whole family is excited about this opportunity. My wife and I have five children, and we are looking forward to this new adventure with them," Wouda says.

Since 2018, Wouda has co-owned J&C Herd Care, a dairy sector service provider offering breeding, reproductive management and robot relief. As a genetics company rep, Wouda has remained closely tied to dairy production and enjoys this aspect of his job. "I love being around cows and I like the industry as a whole. After my dad sold, I was a herdsman at a farm in Agassiz for 12 years before starting J&C Herd Care," Wouda says. "I'm still involved in the dairy industry,

so I never really left. I've just always been looking for an opportunity to be a bigger part of it."

With insight from numerous dairy operations across the Lower Mainland, Wouda enjoyed developing a business plan for the NEP application and dreamt big for the future of his farm. "I definitely will take a little bit from a bunch of different farms management-wise and try to apply it. Hopefully, it all works out together,"

he says.

Wouda has a couple Holsteins to get his operation started, which he hopes to have up and running early next year in Chilliwack, eventually hoping to get the whole family involved in the dairy. "I already work a bit with my oldest son, and he loves being in the barn, so as the other ones get older too, it would be wonderful to have them join in on the farm as well," Wouda says.