



#FridaysOnTheFarm: The Sunderland Seven

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday meet Bob, Nancy, Brittany, Abigail, Vanessa, Laila, and Beau. Farmers Bob and Nancy, and their five kids, make up the Sunderland family. Despite their busy lives, they wouldn't change a thing because they love where they live and what they do.

Meet Bob, Nancy, Brittany, Abigail, Vanessa, Laila, and Beau. Farmers Bob and Nancy, and their five kids, make up the Sunderland family. Despite their busy lives, they wouldn't change a thing because they love where they live and what they do. Their dairy operation in Bridport, Vermont, consists of 440 head of cattle, 450 acres of tillable land, 160 acres of corn, and state-of-the-art technology that helps them manage their dairy workload. A commitment to community and conservation are at the heart of this remarkable and close-knit family.

The Land of Milk and Honey

Located in Vermont's Addison County, Rolling Acres Farm lives up to its name. Verdant green hills dot the landscape where the Sunderlands operate a dairy and raise their five children, including shuttling the kids to after-school activities. The farm has been in operation since 1842, and Bob and Nancy are the fifth generation to make this beautiful landscape their home. Farms dominate Addison County, known as the land of milk and honey, as they have for more than two hundred years.

Dairying prevails, but in the 1800s pastures here were filled with tens of thousands of Merino sheep, which was how Rolling Acres Farm got its beginnings. The farm is in [Vermont's Lake Champlain Basin](#), which is the eighth-largest, naturally-occurring body of fresh water in the continental United States.

"The farm offers my family so much," Bob says. "My kids have the ability to grow up out here and just be kids. They have freedom to enjoy and explore, just like I did."

Conservation is Making an Impact

Beginning in the 1980s, the family implemented conservation practices to protect and improve soil and water quality. Working with the [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#), through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#), they identified a potential runoff concern that could impact a nearby

stream. So, they removed livestock from a barn facility and stopped feeding livestock on a concrete pad.

NRCS Soil Conservationist George Tucker says that the operation, which is 177 years old, is lucky to have stewards like the Sunderlands who want to keep the conservation tradition alive.

“The family has been proactive with their conservation efforts, as opposed to reactive,” George said. “They installed a new waste storage associated with their robot milking barn along with a pump and transfer system. This gave them the needed extra manure storage capacity that they were lacking.”

“For my family, farming and conservation go hand in hand,” said Bob. “Our goal is to try and be good stewards of the land, and the assistance that NRCS offers encourages and makes that possible.”

The Sunderlands said they genuinely care about the health of the land. “It’s in our best interest to make sure soil and water quality are protected so we plan to do more cover crops and incorporate no-till corn,” Bob added. Last year, the family planted nearly 40 acres of cover crops and have more planned this year.

Soldiering On, Despite Milk Prices

The family has worked diligently to grow their business despite the challenges facing dairy farmers and low milk prices. Throughout the Northeast, dairy hardships have resulted in the closure of generations-old dairies.

For the Sunderlands, they decided to change the way they work instead of shutting down. They looked to technology to help solve the labor shortage and keep their farm alive. Bob’s father, uncle, and aunt are involved in the family business but are taking less of a leadership role now that retirement is an option for them. And Nancy said she wants to help preserve the qualities that make Vermont so special.

“People come here to see these green pastures and rolling acres, so if farms go out of business, we lose what makes our state so unique,” said Nancy.

Robotic Milking Equipment Makes Life Easier

Three years ago, they made the switch and installed four computer-assisted, precision-engineered robotic milking machines to milk their cows. They also built a state-of-the-art, free-stall barn that was designed for maximum ventilation and cow comfort. The upgrade has helped Bob reduce his labor commitments. “It changed my routine tremendously and saved me lots of time,” explained Bob.



Thanks to technology, the Sunderlands have more time to spend together. “Now, I spend about three hours mixing feed for the cows, but I also have time to check the computer, and tend to other chores around the farm,” said Bob.

And Nancy says that the technology offers the family more flexibility. “Before the automated milkers and calf feeders, it was 90-hour weeks for Bob.” Bob agrees.

The Sunderlands also implemented a unique system using an old cattle trailer at their local recycling center to collect paper and cardboard from the community and shred it to use as bedding for cows. They say it keeps the cows cleaner and reduces bedding costs.

The Sunderlands are thankful for the resources, like automated milking and feeding equipment, and conservation technical and financial assistance from NRCS. They say it helps make their lives easier, and their resources are protected for the future.

“Now that the kids are older, and we have more time together, our marriage is flourishing, and we really enjoy each other and life on the farm,” explained Nancy.

Life is good for the Sunderlands, and at beautiful Rolling Acres Farm, there’s plenty of reasons to be thankful.

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and recover from natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

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