



Beaver Meadow Farms

Comox BC

Searching for greener pastures

When considering the Smith brothers' story, it's hard to know where to begin.

Their operation, Beaver Meadow Farms, is extensive. It is comprised of 600 acres, 30 of which are planted with cranberry vines and 150 to 200 of which are forested. There are 600 intimidatingly huge beef and dairy cattle. The forest is managed in winter when it is selectively logged and the lumber cut processed at the on-site mill.

The farm's family history is also extensive. Beaver Meadow Farms was started in the mid to late 1930s by the Smith brothers' grandparents. The farm then passed to the Smith brothers' father and then to three of the four Smith brothers. The three of them have now been managing the farm for a quarter of a century. The fourth generation of Smiths, the brothers' children, is growing up together on the farm now.

Edgar, Phillip, and Doug Smith are unassuming, well spoken, and engrossing. All three worked and traveled for several years before returning to the family farm because their father wanted to retire. "The opportunity was there to go into farming. If we didn't, then my

father was prepared to sell the farm," comments Doug. "It was a family decision," adds Edgar. "At that time, we decided we would try, and we're still doing it."

While their father's retirement may have brought them back to the farm, the way of life is what has kept them here. "It's a beautiful area of the world to live," Edgar comments. "It's also a great area to raise children, and a lot of our family roots are here. Personally, I have an attachment to the land where I was born and raised. I wanted to carry on and live here." Phillip agrees, adding "I had good childhood memories growing up here, and I wanted to give my children the same opportunities to grow up in that same environment." Doug replies, "For me, I have a family and two young sons and farming is not the easiest profession in the world—long hours and hard work—but there are a lot of benefits. I think there's something special about living in an area where you have a connection to nature."

There is also something special about the brothers' division of responsibilities. Edgar manages the land. "I look after most of what's related to the land, from growing crops to fertilising to irrigat-

ing," Edgar explains. Phillip is responsible for farm maintenance, as well as for designing and fabricating any farm equipment that can't be purchased. He is a certified farm mechanic who completed his training at Malaspina College after returning to the farm. Doug works with the cattle and takes care of the accounting. The overall effect is synergistic. As Edgar comments, "One of us could not do what all of us together are doing. By joining forces, we have a tremendous strength of talent and ability."

The brothers have focused their talents and abilities on operating under a very unique style of farming. About 13 years ago, the Smith brothers decided to switch from conventional farming to "natural systems" farming. Their efforts paid off in the year 2000 when the farm was officially certified as a "Heritage Dairy Farm." The certification means that Beaver Meadow Farms meets animal welfare, biodiversity, and environmental enhancement standards. It also means that the farm is herbicide and pesticide free and that the dairy herd is one of few in Canada that is largely grazed on grass.

The repercussions of the switch are many for the Smiths. For starters, they

FARM FACTS

Employed –
seasonal: 5

year round: 8

Gross Farm Sales –
\$953,000

Land Owned –
700 acres

Land Leased –
270 acres

enjoy farming more. Doug comments, “I find there’s a lot of satisfaction in being able to farm the way we are farming. I can look out there and say we’ve left things better than they were 15 years ago.” He adds, “I also find cattle are far more enjoyable to work with when they’re out in a pasture. They never seem happy being stuck in a barn in the hot summer weather. They weren’t particularly healthy there, but now they’re stronger, healthier animals. And their behaviour is quite different. They become less fearful because they have room to move around. You can walk through them and they won’t run away.” For Phillip, because the forage is eaten by the animals instead of harvested, it means less equipment and less maintenance, as well as 20,000 fewer liters of diesel fuel per year.

Natural systems farming has also resulted in new products for the Smiths. In the summer of 2001, the Smith brothers, with other partners, built a cheese factory and started marketing specialty cheese throughout British Columbia under the label “Natural Pastures Cheese Company.” Edgar comments, “There aren’t a lot of food products that are produced under sustainable conditions in our society, so

I think in a way we are showing that it can be done.”

Also as a result of natural systems farming, the Smith brothers have enhanced biodiversity and the environment on their farm by building streams, planting trees, and maintaining wildlife habitats. One major project is revitalising the stream that runs through their farm, which, according to Edgar, “was virtually a dying river when we started to enhance it 15 years ago.” It now produces in excess of 300,000 salmon each year, due in large part to the fish hatchery the brothers operate on their property together with the community. The brothers have also taken responsibility for the enhancement of the entire stream, not just the portion on their farmland. Edgar believes that giving the farmer these types of responsibilities makes sense. “We have lived here every day, day in and day out, for generations,” he explains. “We know every inch of our forest, stream, ditches, the nests of the birds, where the eagles perch, and we know how to enhance and protect these resources.”

There are tradeoffs to this new style of farming, however. In particular, it requires that the brothers know much more than before. “Because we practise a

natural style of farming now, we really have to understand the natural conditions,” Edgar explains. “It’s a knowledge or management intensive style of farming versus an energy intensive one where you can just apply excessive amounts of tractor fuel, chemical fertilisers, or things like that.” Edgar and Doug in particular have attended many conferences and seminars around the world to learn more about their chosen profession. Edgar adds, “Natural farming is a highly skilled, highly evolved, technical profession and way of life.”

Trying to find the start of the Smith brothers’ story is like trying to find the starting point of a circle. As with the natural systems style of farming they practice, the Smith brothers’ story is cyclical: all elements relate to and affect each other. The starting place is everywhere, and nowhere.

So it’s obvious now why Edgar comments that natural-systems farming “is a challenge just trying to keep everything integrated and working.” He adds, “It’s a whole system, and you have to have it all together to work. The wildlife, grazing, soil nutrition, water cycles, soil—all this fits together. It’s the new way of farming in the world. No longer can you afford to deplete your soils and

add toxins to the water supply, or degrade wildlife or fish habitats. As responsible stewards of the land and as farmers, we can take a proactive role in providing food that is healthy and safe for us, the cattle, the land, and society—and it can be sustainable at the same time. That’s the pathway we’ve chosen to go here.”