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## Milk Men

Industry veteran Rick Beaman, foreground, is handed the Hiland Dairy president's reins by Gary Aggus.

REBECCA GREEN

### Longtime leader at Hiland Dairy is passing the baton

by Nicole Chilton · Contributing Writer

Gary Aggus started working for a dairy plant during college but never expected to turn it into a lifelong career. Nearly 50 years in the industry later, he's passed down the role of Hiland Dairy's president to Rick Beaman, who is also no stranger to dairy.

"When I first met Gary, we didn't know it, but we both started out in the industry in the exact same way," says Beaman, who came to Springfield-based Hiland Dairy Foods Co. LLC in 2012 as vice president and this month became president.

Aggus began his career at Foremost Dairy as a college student at Missouri Southern State University, and Beaman's start was working with ice cream at Borden Dairy in High Point, North Carolina.

Aggus recalls the last thing he thought he would do in college was stay in the dairy industry.

"These guys got up early and worked long days," Aggus says. "But when I was getting ready to graduate, one of my supervisors was ready to leave, so I figured I'd get some management experience.

"It got in my blood."

Aggus, who joined Hiland Dairy in 1984 as a district sales manager, helped the company go from \$90 million in annual revenue in 1984 to \$2 billion last year. He became the company's president in 2003. Now operating 19 production facilities and 64 distribution centers in the United States, including its headquarters in

Springfield, Aggus says many in Springfield are surprised at how far, and how many of, Hiland's products are sold.

"We've had some nice, consistent growth," Aggus says. "It feels great."

Beaman acknowledges he has big shoes to fill.

"We want to keep it growing," he says. "We'll look at acquisitions that make sense, look at products to grow the business, and see what customers are wanting in order to continue good sales."

One factor that Beaman attributes to Hiland Dairy's growth is that a percentage of the profits are reinvested into the company, depending on the level of performance.

"We have a capital budget we spend each year, depending on the needs," he says. "Some plants might need a new tank, a new silo or a filler machine."

The Springfield processing center recently installed a box line that will automate and supply products to retailers in cardboard boxes rather than recycled plastic crates. The company also relocated its general offices, including management, accounting and human resources, from the Kearney Street plant to Primrose Street on the southeast side of the city.

Beaman says Hiland has created a culture of investing in its employees toward career development and education. It's rooted in the company's mission statement, which says Hiland Dairy aims to treat its "greatest asset, our people, with dignity and respect," by providing "a competitive compensation package and continually training and upgrading the skills of our people." Beaman

says it's common for employees to have 15-20-year tenures.

"Our culture is to promote from within when we can," Aggus adds.

Hiland does not own any dairy farms, but it is a farmer-owned dairy processor.

"Management reports to a board of directors made up of our farmer owners," says Hiland Marketing Manager Sarah Carey, via email, noting between the board and joint ventures with Prairie Farms and Dairy Farmers of America that represents approximately 7,000 dairy farms.

The U.S. dairy industry, according to an economic study released by the International Dairy Foods Association in 2021, shows an impact of \$752.9 billion, making up 3.3 million jobs and \$41.6 billion in direct industry wages. Milk alone represents a \$49 billion economic impact and supports over 62,000 jobs.

"The dairy industry is very competitive," Aggus says. "There were a lot more dairies when we got into the business than today."

According to the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the state is home to 36 Grade-A processing plants, and Hiland operates one in Springfield plus a Memory Lane plant in Fordland. "So many consumers know our company and our products," Beaman says.

Hiland Dairy makes over 500 products, including Silver Dollar City-branded ice cream, seasonal releases of eggnog and flavored milks. Beaman says the product development team works with internal staff to sample new products, as well as with focus groups and social media influencers.

Laura Nielsen, a Nebraska-based food blogger with 12,000 Instagram followers, says she's been

consuming Hiland products since her elementary school cafeteria days.

"Hiland has always been my go-to brand," she says via email. "Now, my own daughter is drinking Hiland milk at her school, too."

Nielsen is a paid partner with Hiland since 2020, providing sponsored content on her blog and newsletter, as well as for Hiland's special email promotions.

"Hiland was at the top of my list because I use the products all the time and they are a Midwest-based company, which made sense for the majority of my audience," she says, declining to disclose her earnings.

Looking ahead, Aggus will remain with Hiland in a consulting role for an indefinite period.

"To go from 130 miles an hour to zero is too drastic, so I'm going from 130 to 30," Aggus says. "We'll just see how it goes over time. I appreciate the company allowing me to do that. I think I can continue to provide some value to Rick and the team, and it will help me in my transition."

### Hiland Dairy Foods Co. LLC

**Owner:** Operators of 7,000 farms

**Founded:** 1938

**Address:** 830 E. Primrose St., Ste. 201, office; 1133 E. Kearney St., plant

**Phone:** 417-862-9311

**Web:** HilandDairy.com

**Services/Products:** Farmer-owned dairy processor, making ice cream, milk, butter, cheese and eggnog, as well as Red Diamond tea, lemonade and juice

**Employees:** 350 local; 4,000 companywide  
**2022 revenue:** \$2 billion