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August Issues Forum will unveil Dairy Animal Care & Quality Assurance

This could be the most important meeting you attend all year. The date is August 7. The time is 9:00 a.m. The place is Bellefonte, Centre County, Pennsylvania. The event is the PDMP Dairy Industry Issues Forum: “Making Your Investment in Animal Welfare Generate a Big Payback.” The morning session will take place at Faith United Methodist Church in Bellefonte; the afternoon session at nearby Murmac Farms, owned and managed by PDMP members Tom and Sherry Craig, their son Brian and daughter Pamela.

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

BELLEFONTE, Pa. — Animal care and comfort have always been key issues for dairy producers. The August PDMP Issues Forum will focus attention on additional steps producers can take to increase their bottom line.

But the importance of this Forum reaches beyond the economic incentive. Dairy producers have only to read the papers and watch the nightly news to realize animal well-being is an increasingly public issue — ever since the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) began releasing undercover videos of non-ambulatory (downer) dairy cows at a beef processing plant in California and several livestock markets in various states.

“Unfortunately, the HSUS videos have heightened awareness to consumers, and they are getting the wrong picture,” says PDMP president Logan Bower. “We have to step up, speak up, and put our best foot forward.”

To that end — even before the first HSUS video made the prime time news — PDMP was the “dairy producer voice at the table” as early as December 2005 when the idea for what is now the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative was first hatched.

Bower recalls the dairy managers meeting he attended in Minneapolis in December 2005. “There were about 50 of us there, producers from across the country, and one of our assignments was to pick out the issues of greatest concern to our industry,” he reflects. “The animal welfare issue was voted to be number one. The Professional Dairy

Producers of Wisconsin (PDPW) then picked up the ball and pushed forward for the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative.”

PDMP was involved in this initiative and later worked with the Center for Dairy Excellence to invite Chad Gregory from the United Egg Producers as a speaker for the 2008 Pennsylvania Dairy Summit. There, Gregory talked about the challenges egg producers have weathered and their implementation of Quality Assurance certification.

Then came the HSUS videos.

“In a sense, we started developing a program for dairy when the wolf was nowhere to be seen. Now we’re moving forward with it, and the wolf is not just at the doorstep, but in our living room,” Bower states.

Today, momentum is building, nationally, in anticipation of finalized Dairy Animal Well-Being guidelines to be issued in October. In Pennsylvania, dairy groups have spent the past year forging relationships with their beef counterparts to develop a producer certification program tailor-made for dairy.

During the PDMP Issues Forum Aug. 7, speakers will discuss the Dairy Animal Care and Quality Assurance (DACQA) program and the positive impact these practices can have on the dairy’s bottom line while at the same time, strengthening consumer confidence in dairy and beef products.

The DACQA program is a natural extension of the state’s Dairy Beef Quality Assurance program, which was previously developed and implemented by the Pennsylvania Beef Council.

The two concepts are synergistic because the condition of dairy market cows at the end of their productive life is a reflection of animal care, handling, and marketing decisions, as is the quality of the beef harvested from these market dairy cows.

DACQA is a voluntary program that helps the quality-conscious dairy producer meet the expectations of the quality-conscious consumer, while at the same time enhancing the dairy’s profitability.

“Logan Bower has been on our beef board for six years, and he observed that our Quality Assurance program had most of the elements we’re seeing now in the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Guidelines. The previous program was just not packaged correctly for dairy producers,” observes Paul Slayton, Beef Council executive director and one of several speakers for the training at the upcoming Issues Forum. “PDMP got squarely behind this, pushed it forward, and brought others along with them.”

Between the longstanding support of the Pennsylvania Dairy Stakeholders, PDMP and more recently, the Center for Dairy Excellence, the DACQA program is positioned to benefit individual dairy farms and the industry as a whole.

“PDMP has taken a leadership role. They’ve stepped up with concern about the risk involved to the dairy industry,” Slayton adds. “As professional dairy managers and owners, they unselfishly recognized the need to do something and to provide the means for others to be a part of this effort by endorsing a certification program that protects dairy producers in the face of this threat from animal activists. They have raised the bar.”

Bower notes that he viewed the previous Quality Assurance program like most dairy farmers did: seeing it as a ‘beef’ program.

“Then we looked through the manual and saw how close it was to qualifying for what the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Guidelines are going to be,” Bower explains. “So we met with the Beef Council, discussed it with the Secretary of Agriculture, introduced the concept to the milk cooperatives, and set about making the certification program and manual user-friendly for dairy.”

After all, why have several separate programs doing the same thing when they can be brought together as one?

“Basically we all should be doing this,” says Bower. “Ethically, we should be managing our operations to avoid the down cow issue and avoid having poor condition cows going to market.”

It’s important for dairy producers to realize there will be a program at some point in time, says Bower. “We’re involved because we want to have a part in creating the definitions of that program. With PDMP involved, we have producer input along with stakeholders, professors, veterinarians and others. We want to have a respectable program we can take to food marketers, and say: ‘Here’s our program. It certifies and verifies that our producers are truly caring for their animals and producing food in an ethically acceptable manner.’”

It all comes back to PDMP’s willingness as an organization to take a stand on an issue. “Not only take a stand but to be active in making things happen before someone else comes in (without knowledge or understanding of dairy production) and tells us what to do,” says Bower. “We’re assuring that the dairy producer has a seat at the table and that we can work together to make a difference.”

This is just one example of how PDMP is fulfilling its mission to advance the dairy industry in Pennsylvania by staying ahead of the curve on technologies that improve and issues that confront all dairy producers.

In their presentation of DACQA at the Forum on Aug. 7, Paul Slayton and Chris Jeffcoat from the Beef Council will review results of the 2007 National Dairy Market Cow Audit and the dollars dairy producers leave on the table when quality defects find their way into the market.

Covering some of the DACQA best management practices, a panel will explore “The Practical Economics of Taking A Well Cow to Market,” featuring tour host Tom Craig, Murmac Farms; dairy producer Phoebe Bitler, Vista Grande Farm, Fleetwood, and Drew Wilkins, Cargill Meat Solutions procurement manager, Wyalusing.

PDMP’s Aug. 7 Issues Forum is open to all dairy producers and industry representatives. Sponsor support makes it possible for PDMP to consistently offer high quality, timely meetings with low registration fees. The cost for this Forum is \$25 for members and \$75 for non-members.

Non-members can elect to take advantage of a one-time “member rate” for this important event and learn more about how membership is an investment not only in the producer’s own dairy business, but also in the future of dairy farming in Pennsylvania. To register, call 877-326-5993, toll-free, or email info@pdmp.org. Registration forms are also available online at www.pdmp.org.