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Working together, we enhance consumer trust and protect our freedom to operate

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The well-being of livestock on U.S. farms has become an increasingly important issue to our customers and other stakeholders. Although dairy animal well-being has not been a top-of-mind consumer concern, recent developments in animal welfare activism such as the Westland/Hallmark incident, and the latest videos released by the HSUS depicting mistreatment of downer cows at livestock auctions, are signals that our industry is receiving more attention.

As an industry and as individual producers, we must heighten our awareness of this “social license” of operation. As usual, the rules of our business are constantly changing. As the public gains more concern for where and how their food is produced, we as producers must flow with this social trend and position our businesses with the best foot forward. As has been most recently demonstrated this past year, our customers wield an influence over our production methods. This is an issue we must learn to deal with.

PDMP has been active with numerous other dairy and ag organizations within the state of Pennsylvania in an effort to better position the dairy industry in the eyes of the consumer. Closely related to on-farm animal well-being, is the post-farm\pre-harvest concerns held by activists.

In the past, most producers have believed that once that animal is on the truck headed to auction, she is no longer ‘my problem’ (out of sight-out, out of mind). In the future, we must rethink this philosophy and place more focus on the condition of our pre-harvest animals. Not only is it our moral obligation to do so, it is also of economic value to our business. Instead of milking an animal until she has been completely physically exhausted, we must re-evaluate our culling decisions and remove these animals in a timely manner or recondition these animals before they are sent to market or the beef plant.

After a recent visit to Cargill Meat Solutions (formerly Taylor Packing) in Wyalusing Pa., I gained a new outlook on the importance of quality market cows. There is a real demand

for dairy beef, beyond hamburger. In fact, the demand for quality dairy market cow beef is so high that Cargill has trouble at times keeping up with it.

Dairy organizations, including PDMP, have worked with the Pennsylvania Beef Council to expand the previous Dairy Beef Quality Assurance (DBQA) program, now becoming known as the Dairy Animal Care and Quality Assurance (DACQA) program.

The original DBQA has been in existence for about 10 years. Initially it was conceived as a beef program to reduce the economic impact of injection site blemishes. Unfortunately, it is still perceived as this type of beef program by most dairy producers today. However the program has evolved and made huge strides in becoming more of a “dairy animal well-being” program. In fact the certification manual is currently under edit and review in an effort to make it more “dairy friendly.”

The beauty of this program is: it is two-fold. As in the past, it has emphasis on beef quality. But now it also covers other key areas of management, housing and facilities, nutrition, health, handling and transportation, which will very likely qualify under the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Principals and Guidelines currently under construction.

Furthermore, the program currently comes to the producer at no cost.

This may sound like just more rules and regulations that the producer has to deal with. To a degree this is true, however the rules of doing business are constantly changing, and a voluntary program such as DACQA can go a long way in granting the Pennsylvania dairy producer the “social license” we now need to operate.

As dairy producers, we are fortunate because consumers currently have a relatively high level of trust and confidence in us. It is imperative that we come together to maintain and enhance that trust and to protect our freedom to operate. To do this, we must actively demonstrate that we recognize our ethical obligation to care for our animals and most importantly, that we have effective and consistent programs to ensure we meet that obligation.