

Why these producers will make upcoming Dairy Summit a priority

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

LANCASTER, Pa.—“Hearing from people in the food industry: That is my favorite part of the program every year at the Pennsylvania Dairy Summit,” says PDMP member Keith Spicher, Belleville, Pa. He and his brother Kent own and manage Kish-View Dairy, milking 330 cows. For the past several years they have taken turns attending the Summit, but last year they were able to attend together. In fact, they usually travel to Summit with their independent nutrition consultant Russ Kline.

“Last year we heard from a speaker from the national egg board, and I see this year there will be someone on the program from Wegmans. That will be a highlight,” Keith relates.

“Summit is about more than just the farming side of things. There are so many meetings I can go to, to learn about cow management. But at the Dairy Summit, they always have good things in the program on the food industry,” he reflects. “With more food industry people attending the Summit, we even had the opportunity last year to meet the director of dairy operations for the Weis Markets plant in Sunbury where we ship our milk. That was really great for us.”

This year’s Summit will deliver food industry topics: with a new twist. On the second day of the Summit—which runs Feb. 11 and 12 in Lancaster, Pa.—attendees are invited to take part in two “open discussions,” which will center on growing markets and emerging opportunities for dairy in the Northeast. The discussions will jumpstart everyone’s thinking about the potential for growth and vitality of dairy farming in this region.

In addition to discussions with speakers from the dairy food processing side, one of the two “open discussions” will feature Ken Cassara, vice president of dairy and frozen foods for Wegmans, a supermarket chain with more than 75 stores in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Virginia. Ranked number three on *Fortune* magazine’s 2008 list of the “100 Best Companies to Work For,” Wegmans is described by industry analyst Neil Stern as: “The best chain in the country, maybe in the world.”

Summit attendees will hear about how Wegmans raised the bar on the shopping experience they offer their customers by—as Cassara themes his discussion—“Taking the Ordinary to Extraordinary.”

This will be a great discussion, not just about trends and markets, but in learning from the



PDMP members Keith Spicher (above) and his brother Kent own and manage a 330-cow dairy farm: Kish-View Dairy, Belleville, Pa. They have been attending the Pennsylvania Dairy Summit for several years.

Wegmans example: How did they accomplish their “nearly telepathic level” of customer service, and why?

Consumers and the food industry will also be a topic on the Summit’s opening day, with the first general session of the morning a presentation by Dr. John Stanton of St. Joseph’s University on “Emerging Trends in the Dairy Industry.” Stanton has spent the past 30 years working in the food marketing industry.

Aside from the program, Keith Spicher says what he enjoys most is “talking with the other producers, who I see there at Summit every year. It’s nice to be around people who are optimistic. We especially need that positive thinking in this milk market today.”

Keith also looks forward to hearing from dairymen from other parts of the country.

“I like how every year they have producers from other regions,” he reports. “It’s interesting to see what they do differently and their unique challenges and to identify with the thing we have in common. Even though I don’t go for the cow management topics as a highlight, the Summit still offers some of those things too in the breakout sessions. We bring back a lot of good stuff from those sessions to talk about in our team meetings on the farm.”

For Jason Martin, Waynesboro, Pa., the best part of Summit is “being able to talk to the other producers that are there, and I really like the breakout sessions,” he says. “They are a way for me to learn and be able to keep myself in-check on where we’re at on our farm.”

PDMP members Jason and his father Jack own and operate JEM Farms, milking 180 cows. Jason says he appreciates the contacts

with other members. “It’s like building a support group of people. You know you have someone to talk to about things you have questions on,” he relates.

Jason really looks forward to the Dairy Summit each year, having attended the past three.

“The first year I went both days. Then it can get tough to get away, so the last two years I picked one day to go, but I’d like to try to get there both days this year. Even though it’s hard to get away, I look at what I get out of it, and it’s definitely worth it,” he confirms.

“It’s the ideas and the people who are there,” he adds. “I’ve found most producers who are there are very positive about the dairy industry, and they are in it for the long haul. They are a great inspiration to me, and I usually come back from those meetings with a better outlook than I had before I went there. Actually, I come back from Summit with stuff I think about for a whole entire year.”

For Don Martin, Chambersburg, Pa., the highlight of Dairy Summit is the motivational speakers. Don and his father own and operate Falling Spring Farms, milking 160 cows.

“We have been members of PDMP for 12 years, and we always try to get to the Dairy Summit for at least one day,” says Don. “Last year, I really learned a lot from the speaker on media relations. I really liked her presentation on how to speak for the industry with a positive message and a caring message from the heart.”

This year, the breakout sessions include a similar topic with a different angle: “How to Profit from Telling Our Story: A Look at How One Dairy Farm Reaches Out To The Local



PDMP member Jason Martin (above) and his father Jack own and operate a 180-cow dairy farm: JEM Farms, Waynesboro, Pa. Jason has been attending the Pennsylvania Dairy Summit for three years.

Photos by Sherry Bunting

Community.” For this breakout, Ron Robbins, a dairy producer from Sackets Harbor, New York, will talk about how he and his wife have added agri-entertainment and public education to their 500-cow dairy farm.

Don Martin says he also finds it is hard to get away from the farm for meetings. “We don’t get to a lot of meetings, but we have found the interaction with other producers and the informative meetings PDMP puts on are worthwhile.”

Don and his father attend Dairy Summit together. “We came away from last year’s Summit feeling this was one of the best meetings we ever attended,” he reflects. “A lot of times you go to a meeting and hear about the issues and the things you deal with every day on the farm. Dairy Summit has a different twist. There are opportunities to learn, but it also has motivational speakers. Even though it’s a dairy focus, the twist is it gets you away from the every-day issues and motivates you.”

For Timothy Kurtz, Elverson, Pa., the Dairy Summit is special because “it brings industry people and producers together under one roof: That’s important,” he says.

Tim and his wife Deborah own and operate Kurtland Farms, milking 125 cows.

“The Dairy Summit always has a top quality lineup of speakers covering a broad spectrum of topics,” says Tim. “We get to hear from large, out-of-state innovative producers and also smaller ones from our area who are on the cutting edge. We also have the ability to network with each other and meet other producers from around the state.”

Tim says he always enjoys the motivational speaker who wraps things up at the end of the Summit.

“I think there’s a lot of ideas out there and at the Dairy Summit, we get to see those things that are very innovative, that help us think outside the box, looking at ways to capitalize on energy opportunities, for example, not just going to a meeting on the same things of repro, mastitis and nutrition,” he explains. “The Dairy Summit gives us an opportunity, as producers, to think about what we are doing as an industry to utilize technologies and improve today’s marketplace. Plus they always have a few sessions where you can pick up a few things to improve on your own dairy operation.”

Like Keith, Tim also enjoys being able to meet up with and talk to people he doesn’t run into every day, or perhaps all year, except at Summit.

There will be lots to see and do at the 2009 Dairy Summit at the Lancaster Host Conference Center February 11 and 12. Through a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, offered through the Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board (WIB), dairy producers and their employees can attend at a significant discount.

For more information about the Dairy Summit and for registration materials, contact PDMP at 877.326.5993 or visit www.padairy-summit.org.

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