



STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE DAIRY CHALLENGE visit real farms and collect information from everywhere, including the silage pile (below) and herd records' book. Students then present findings and recommendations to a panel of judges and the farm's staff (left).

WELCOME to the real world

Dairy Challenge teaches students real-world problem solving.

by Cherie Bayer

THEY'RE glad. Yes, that is the verdict from students who have competed in the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge (NAIDC). Others who have hosted the event at their dairies or helped put on the two-day competition only wish there had been such an opportunity for them when they were in college.

"There is not anything else like the NAIDC," says Iris Peeler Neale, a member of Virginia Tech's team in 2002. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I didn't know when I was preparing, or even competing, how much that experience would help me in my current job."

"Dairy Challenge is probably one of the most valuable things I did during my college career," agrees 2006 Cal Poly team member Rebekah Mast. "By doing the Dairy Challenge, I was able to see that the things I learned about nutrition, genetics, reproduction, and management all do apply."

"This is probably the best program I've seen as far as training dairy students," observes dairyman Mark Ahlem, who hosted the first western regional Dairy Challenge at his California farm in 2006. "When I was at Cal Poly, they didn't have it. It would have been really good. You can go to classes, but you have to get out there and see the real deal because it's a different ball game."

What is Dairy Challenge?

Dairy Challenge began at Michigan State University in 2000 as a practical on-farm evaluation experience for senior dairy science students. The contests in 2000 and 2001 were so successful that, in 2002, Dairy Challenge went national. According to Penn State professor emeritus Larry Muller, chair of the NAIDC Board of Directors, "465 university students with interest in the dairy industry, from 45 universities, participated in one of the four regionals or the national contest last year."

"This contest allows students to explore all avenues of the dairy business and apply their skills in competition against other schools," explains Todd Kranz, a founding member of the NAIDC board. "They have to know what makes a dairy operate and know what makes a dairy profitable. They are asked to explore their knowledge in

dairy management, to put together the finance, nutrition, reproductive management and cow comfort issues," Kranz continues. "Each of these issues are so interrelated today that, if you're working in reproduction, for example, you'd better know why nutrition affects what your results will be."

"By the nature of the Dairy Challenge name, we're hoping that students will be challenged themselves and help us better the industry," says Linda Hodorff, also a founding member of the NAIDC. "Universities and their curriculums are challenged to address the needs of the future. And those who are involved in helping with the competition and the program are challenged to keep up to date with the things that are moving ahead in the industry."

What it's like . . .

The Dairy Challenge competition format is simple. "Student teams walk through the dairies, ask the owners questions, and analyze the farm's data," explains University of Minnesota team coach Marcia Endres. "After analyzing the data and coming up with recommendations, they put together a Power Point presentation they give the following day to the owners and a panel of dairy industry judges."

Contest rankings are determined by the judges' evaluations of each team's presentation and management recommendations. "We typically have five judges evaluating the students and the farms," Linda Hodorff explains. "We have at least one producer on that panel along with others with expertise in various segments of ag business."

"One of the most challenging parts of the NAIDC was being on top of your specific area of expertise," recalls Sarah Mullen, a member of the team from Iowa State University in 2006. "There are no textbooks to double check facts or num-

bers. You cannot use the internet. You are identifying opportunities for improvement and making recommendations solely on your own knowledge and experience.

"That's when you really appreciate having a team," Mullen continues. "If there's one thing that never ceases to amaze me about dairying, it is how interconnected every aspect of the operation is.

The challenge becomes prioritizing recommendations for things that can get done immediately and changes that could bring the economic payoff."

"Dairy Challenge is a unique event because it involves producers, agribusiness, and universities working together to develop the young people who are going to be continuing in our industry," Linda Hodorff points out.

"We're thankful for the producers who have worked with us. It's a tremendous time commitment for them, and it can potentially disrupt some of their day-to-day operations when you think that perhaps 50 to 100 extra people might be coming to the farm watching how they do things, plus their concerns for biosecurity and farm safety."

Idaho dairyman Todd Roth decided to be a host for the 2006 NAIDC contest because, "I was interested in getting feedback on my dairy to find out what areas were our weaknesses and what were our strengths so I could improve the weaknesses and continue the strengths.

"All the students were very professional, very educated, and very well informed. They did wonderful presentations. I was very thankful that I did it."

What would Roth say to someone who was considering hosting a Dairy Challenge contest? "If you're interested in growing as a dairy farmer and becoming a better farmer, then I would suggest that you get involved in the Dairy Challenge."

The mission of Dairy Challenge is to facilitate education, communication, and an exchange of ideas among students, agribusiness, dairy producers, and universities that



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enhances the development of the dairy industry and its leaders.

"The Dairy Challenge introduced me to a new breed of dairy contest," says John Goeser, an alumni of the 2004 contest who continued his involvement while completing a doctorate in dairy nutrition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "The Challenge prepared me for my current position by giving me the opportunity to work as part of a team and speak to a dairy producer, make recommendations, and accept critical feedback. And I was able to learn and teach others how to compete in the real world as a consultant.

Goeser continues, "There is no single educational event that is more relevant to the dairy industry today than the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge."

The 2009 national Dairy Challenge contest will be held March 27 and 28 in Syracuse, N.Y. For more information, visit www.dairychallenge.org, or contact Molly J. Kelley, executive director, at naidc@wdexpo.com.



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