

Dairy Challenge: An Industry's Response

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What happens when an industry senses that it will have problems finding highly motivated future employees? In many cases the sector will experience limited capacity as workers leave or are not attracted to the vocation, in other cases the demand for workers will rise and pay will also increase. However, a third option exists—when the businesses themselves take a hands-on approach and actively pursue the attraction and training of candidates for their field.

This was the case in 2002 when Select Sires, among many other dairy industry leaders and companies, banded together and created the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge (NAIDC), an annual competition that sought to garner the interest and increase the dairy knowledge of students across the United States. In conjunction with Michigan State University, a school in the heart of dairy country, the very first Challenge was put on with the help of dairy professionals and collegiate volunteers alike. This habit of volunteerism continues today, such that Molly Kelley, the Executive Director, is the only person to draw a salary. From fundraising to organization, answering



Teams 10, 11 and 12 at Rolling Hills Jerseys.

phones to coordinating events, each aspect of the association is skillfully managed by an energetic staff of volunteers across the nation.



Team 3 at the awards banquet with Dr. Kas Ingawa and their certificate as first place platinum.

One such volunteer is Dr. Kas Ingawa. He has a PhD in Dairy Science from Louisiana State University, and holds the unique distinction of being the only person to have attended every single Dairy Challenge to date. He currently is employed by Dairy Records Management Systems, a data analysis company that assists dairy farmers with records management. After seeing the success at Michigan State, and the expansion of that work into the Midwest and Western parts of the United States, Dr. Ingawa began to strive for a Southern Regional Challenge.

The spark and fire that his interest provided, assisted by the work and efforts of many others, led to the creation of a committee to form the Southern Challenge, headed by Dr. Albert deVries of the University of Florida. Shortly thereafter, the very first Southern Dairy Challenge was hosted by Virginia Tech at Roanoke, Virginia in November, 2006. Forty-one students and seven schools attended this inaugural competition, including the University of Florida, Louisiana State University, North Carolina State University, Ferrum College, Virginia Tech, University of Georgia and Clemson University. The second year, LSU hosted the event, which was followed by the competition of this past week, held by NC State University. At the 2008 contest with the committee chaired by Dave Winston of Virginia Tech, 12 schools and 54 students participated, adding such well-known universities as West Virginia, Kentucky, Western Kentucky, Alabama A&M and Mississippi State into the mix. Our own Berry College has participated each of the past two years. Clearly, the southern challenge is a growing phenomenon, proven by the fact that two host farms were required for this year's competition. With such high levels of participation, the southern teams will certainly become better equipped to compete at the national level.

So, what actually comprises a *Dairy Challenge*, one might ask? Simply put, the challenge involves groups of students evaluating production and financial records as well as an on-farm assessment of a working dairy farm. They are then judged upon their presentation of that farm's strengths and weaknesses and their recommendations for improvement. In more detail, the regional competition involves both two- and four-year institutions that have animal science programs, with each school being allowed to send up to six students (plus two alternates) and a coach.

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Only one year of animal science training is required for participation, however, the students are mixed up upon arriving, such that no school is represented more than once in each team. These various teams are then given all the records from a working dairy farm, taken to the facility and given two hours to evaluate the operation, from feeding and milking to reproduction and calf rearing.



Teams 10, 11 and 12 interviewing their host farmer, Jimmy Gray.

At this point, the groups are given five hours to create a 20-minute power point presentation on their findings, which will be presented to a panel of five judges. Each judge panel is composed of real-life industry professionals representing each of five fields: nutrition, reproduction, finance, dairy farmer and veterinarian.

The judges then evaluate the student performances on a 100-point scale and discuss their decision with the students, possibly asking further questions. Then, at the awards banquet on the final night of the competition, awards are given. Every student gets a certificate of participation and either a silver, gold or platinum rating. The platinum winners receive a small scholarship for their winning efforts.

The major difference between regional and national competitions is that each school may only send four representatives to the national event. Also, the teams compete by school affiliation and only four-year institutions are allowed to participate.

As a way to make it easier for schools to attend, room and board are covered for every participant. Even transportation stipends are awarded, which partially covers the travel costs for each school. It is the generosity of the dairy industry that provides for these considerable costs, and illuminates the seriousness with which they hope to accomplish their goal of attracting quality students to their business. Dr. Gary Hay of LSU is the volunteer in charge of contacting these industry donors and coordinating their gifts to pay for the student expenses.

Noticeably, the many volunteers that run the event are all expected to pay their own way, a reflection of the sacrifice that people like Dr. Ingawa and Dr. Steve Washburn make to allow students to have such an enlightening experience. Dr. Washburn is an animal science professor at NC State University and the coach of their dairy challenge team. He served this year as the co-chair of the Local Arrangements Committee and also serves as the University contact person for recruiting schools to participate in the challenges.



Dr. Steve Washburn

In conclusion, everyone involved in this unique effort has been very pleased. Not only have the numbers increased with every regional and national competition, but challenges now span the continental United States and have usually included a team or two from Canada. In fact, the newly formed southern region is set to host the NAIDC competition in the spring of 2011. Work is already under way for this event, which will be held in Hickory, North Carolina. Even the volunteers, who sacrifice much for the sake of the students, are overjoyed at the operation's success. In this last southern competition, a dairy farmer who served as a judge wrote a letter saying, "Thank you and all your staff for picking me to judge. I at first felt inadequate to serve, but found it a learning experience and enjoyed working with the students and other judges. It would be an honor to be able to help again in the future." With this type of enthusiasm from its volunteers, the Dairy Challenge cannot help but continue its amazing work.

Likewise, the dairy industry has received great feedback for their efforts. One example of this can be seen from the experience of Dr. Jenks Britt at Western Kentucky University. Of twenty students that his school has sent to previous competitions, about half of them are enrolled or have graduated from vet school, and several others are at work on actual dairy farms or other dairy-related jobs. Western Kentucky, along with the University of Kentucky, and Eastern Kentucky are planning to host the Southern Dairy Challenge in November, 2009.

With this example of sacrifice and reward, it is clear that the dairy industry in the United States is strong, and that we will continue to see many Dairy Challenges for years to come.