

Preparing for the real world

Students participate in Midwest Dairy Challenge competition hosted by U of M

By **Krista M. Sheehan**

Staff writer

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ROCHESTER, Minn. – University of Minnesota senior, Amanda Rasmussen, wants to gain as much hands-on dairy experience as she can in order to achieve her career goal of becoming a dairy consultant.

“Many people say the more dairy farms and the variety of dairy farms you go to, the more your eyes open to what a good farm is ... and understand the many different ways dairy farms can be managed,” said Rasmussen, an animal science major.

Evaluating a dairy during the fifth annual Midwest Dairy Challenge put Rasmussen one step closer to her goal. And she was able to do it right in her home state.

Over 65 students from 15 colleges and universities participated in the Midwest Dairy Challenge Jan. 29-31 in Rochester, Minn. This was the first time the University of Minnesota has hosted the event.

Marcia Endres – University of Minnesota dairy scientist, coach of the University of Minnesota dairy challenge teams and Midwest contest host coordinator – said the contest started as an idea from industry representatives. She said they wanted a competition beyond judging dairy cattle.

“They said, ‘Let’s do a contest where students work as a team like consultants who go to troubleshoot a farm – like the vet, nutritionist, the herd manager. They can be working together to evaluate a dairy,’” Endres said.

In 2002, the first North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge took place and shortly after, four regional contests –Northeast, Southern, Midwest and Western – were established. Over 130 companies support the NAIDC.

“This is an industry-lead effort,” Endres said.

The national and the regional contests have a very similar schedule. The students are allowed about two hours to collect data and evaluate all aspects of a dairy operation such as milking procedure, reproduction, nutrition, animal health, animal housing and finance management. Then they are given four hours to analyze their collected data and put together a 20-minute presentation about the farm.

“The students focus on areas where they think producers could improve their profitability,” Endres said.

Teams give their presentations to a panel of judges, then answer any questions. The judges rank the teams as Platinum, Gold or Silver, with Platinum being the top honor.

However, the regional contest takes a slightly different approach to the competition. Instead of representing one college or university, teams are mixed and students work with other students outside their school.

“This allows an additional challenge of working with someone they just met the day before,” Endres said. “It’s like in real life. They could be at a dairy where they’ve never met the vet or the nutritionist and they have to work with them as a team.”

Rasmussen worked with students from University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Wisconsin-River Falls and Purdue University. She said working with students from other universities had its challenges, but was a good experience.

“We had to designate everyone’s strengths and organize ourselves from there so everyone had their focus area and an equal,” Rasmussen said about her team, which received a gold ranking. “Mixed teams help overcome the hesitation of working with a stranger you never knew and having

less than 10 hours to put together a great presentation everyone likes and to work well through it.”

Whether students are competing at the regional contests or at the national contest, Endres said the competition is a learning opportunity.

“It’s a systems based approach and the students are looking at all aspects of the farm,” Endres said. “I think it’s key for training students who want to work in many different areas of the dairy industry. And they can’t just be a nutritionist. They have to understand a little bit about cow comfort ... the financials of the dairy ... and be a little broader based.”

Endres also said the contests teach students how to manage time, be organized and work as a team.

“This is a very short contest, but students use a lot of skills,” Endres said.

But the contest doesn’t only benefit the students. The host farms also get to hear the presentations and the students’ comments. Whitewater Dairy in Plainview, Minn., was one of two host farms for this year’s Midwest Dairy Challenge.

“As a dairy producer you have an idea of your own challenges on your farm. But the students bring in another perspective to what you see everyday,” said Maurie Young, co-owner of Whitewater Dairy.

The dairy challenge competitions also help the dairy industry thrive, building dairy leaders for the future, Endres said. Many of the judges, moderators and volunteers who help with the dairy challenges are industry representatives.

“Companies are looking at these students as potential employees because they know they are the best students and they are interested in working with dairy systems in the real world,” Endres said.

Rasmussen said meeting more people in the industry will help her in the future.

“You can do a lot of networking and you get to work with a lot of professionals – the judges, moderators, volunteers and host farms,” she said. “I think (the dairy challenge) is a really good opportunity whether you’re going into the industry or back to the farm. It gives us all more ideas for the future.”