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Midwest Dairy Challenge draws over 65 students to Minnesota

A total of 69 students with interest in the dairy industry participated in the fifth annual Midwest Dairy Challenge, January 29-31, 2009, in Rochester, Minnesota.

"This year we were able to provide a valuable learning experience for students from 15 schools across the Midwest," said contest chair Ryan Millett from Elanco Animal Health. "The students were challenged to analyze two extremely well-managed dairies in southeast Minnesota."

The Dairy Challenge is an innovative competition developed by industry and university professionals, which exposes students to opportunities in a vibrant dairy industry. Working in four- or five-person, mixed-university teams, students assessed all aspects of a working dairy farm and presented recommendations for improvement to a panel of judges and the participating farm families.

This year's contest, hosted by the University of Minnesota, included students from Iowa State University, Lakeshore Technical College, Michigan State University, Ridgewater College, Kansas State University, The Ohio State University, Purdue University, South Dakota State University, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Wisconsin-River Falls, Northeast Iowa Community College, and the UW-Madison Farm & Industry Short Course.

After they arrived, students joined their new teammates and had the opportunity to learn from professionals in the dairy industry during a career panel. They were then allowed to get to know each other and to begin learning about the dairy they would be analyzing.

The next day, students were led on farm tours of two dairies located in the Rochester area by Midwest Dairy Challenge Committee members. Gar-Lin Dairy Farms began in 1971 with 40 cows when Gary and Linda Allen purchased the farm from Gary's parents. Since that time, the dairy has seen significant

change. In 2006, Gar-Lin formed a partnership with Gene and Phyllis Speltz. At that time, the dairy grew to 1,100 cows and has grown from within to the current size of 1,500 cows.

Whitewater Dairy LLC came into existence in February 2006 when two dairy producer couples teamed up to purchase an existing dairy. Maurie and Rita Young and John and Connie Meyer each owned and operated a 500-cow dairy prior to purchasing the new dairy. The dairy was purchased as a turn-key operation with 400 milked three times per day and today consists of 500 cows.

After the tours, the students had time to meet with their teams and develop questions for the herd owners. The herd owners were then put in touch with the students and entertained questions from both students and judges about their farming operations. Armed with detailed production and financial paperwork from the farms, as well as their own observations, the participants developed a presentation about what they saw and suggestions for improvement. Saturday was presentation day as the teams were given 20 minutes to offer their suggestions. This was followed by a question-and-answer session and a critique by the judges regarding their presentation and recommendations.

Throughout the weekend, participants had several opportunities to network with industry professionals who attended the event. Representatives from many of the platinum sponsors, including several who were looking to hire both interns and full-time employees, were also available for a career fair that was held on Saturday.

Judges chose two teams as platinum winners, the contest's highest distinction. The individuals who comprised these teams are: Clint Harre, University of Illinois; Tim Andrews, Lakeshore Technical College; Joe Pasch, Michigan State University; Brian Bagge from Northeast Iowa Community College; Paige Gott and Renee Starkey of The Ohio State University; Matt Wold from Ridgewater College; Jessica Berg, South Dakota State University; and Jordan Matthews and Phil Monson, both from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

About Dairy Challenge

The mission of the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge is to facilitate education, communication and an exchange of ideas among students, agribusiness, dairy producers and universities that enhances the development of the dairy industry and its leaders. All contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. Contributing sponsors are recognized on the Dairy Challenge web site, as well as brochures and programs issued throughout the year.

The 2009 national contest will be held March 27 and 28 in Syracuse, N.Y.

For more information or to become a sponsor of the Dairy Challenge program, visit www.dairychallenge.org or contact Molly J. Kelley, Executive Director, at naidc@wdexpo.com.

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Note to Editors: Photos of contest winners are available by contacting Lisa Behnke, WDE Management Inc., 3310 Latham Drive, Madison, WI 53713, phone: 608-224-0400, ext. 108, fax: 608-224-0300, or e-mail: lbehnke@wdexpo.com.