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Contact: Steve Washburn
Southern Regional Dairy Challenge Publicity Chairman
Phone: 919-515-7726
Fax: 919-515-2152
Email: Steve_Washburn@ncsu.edu

First Southern Regional Dairy Challenge hosts 41 students

On Nov. 19-21, 2006 41 students from nine southern colleges and universities participated in the first annual Southern Regional Dairy Challenge held at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center in Roanoke, Va. Dave Winston from Virginia Tech welcomed students from Alabama A & M University, Clemson University, University of Georgia, Ferrum College, University of Florida, Louisiana State University, North Carolina State University, Virginia Tech and Western Kentucky University.

The Southern Regional Dairy Challenge is an innovative three-day event designed by industry and university professionals to strengthen the dairy industry's future. Working in mixed-university teams of five students, contestants assessed all aspects of a working dairy farm and presented recommendations for improvement to a panel of judges and the participating farm family.

The host farm was L.R. Hammock and Sons in Chatham, Va. After hearing the students' recommendations, dairy farmer Nathan Hammock smiled and stated, "I thought I was doing great in the dairy business. Now I know there is room for improvement."

One objective of the Dairy Challenge is to create a real-life situation that stresses the importance of teamwork and professionalism. Program Chairman Dave Winston stated, "It's amazing what the students accomplished in a short time period. They built a team from scratch, analyzed the dairy farm from multiple perspectives, and made outstanding presentations to our judges to report their findings. The skills they learned through their participation in the Dairy Challenge will help them significantly as they prepare for their careers."

Students arrived at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center on the afternoon of Nov. 19. After check-in and registration, participants were split into mixed-university teams. The composite team approach provided a unique opportunity for students to build team skills as well as learn more about dairy

programs at other universities. Team members got to know one another while eating pizza and then participated in team-building exercises with Winston.

Winston worked with students to discover the strengths and capabilities of their teams, examine ingredients of effective teams, appoint a team leader, and examine personality styles of team members. At the end of the evening, teams received detailed production, financial, nutrition and reproduction records, and began brainstorming in preparation of their farm visit.

The next morning, teams traveled to the host farm to evaluate cows, facilities and management practices. After a two-hour farm visit, teams returned to the hotel to analyze their data and develop recommendations for improvement. Each team prepared a 20-minute presentation that detailed their observations and suggestions.

During Monday night's dinner, David Craun and his wife, Julie, dairy producers from Franklin County, Va., joined the group and reflected on their approach and challenges in starting a new dairy with use of intensive grazing plus a total mixed ration. After dinner, participants enjoyed indoor go-carts, laser tag and the game room at the Thunder Valley Family Entertainment Center in Salem, Va.

On the program's final day, each team presented their evaluation and recommendations to a panel of industry judges. Teams were ranked as platinum, gold or silver – based on how well their evaluations matched the judges' evaluations of the dairy operation. All participants traveled to National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Va., while they were not presenting. The Dairy Challenge ended with dinner and an awards ceremony.

Louisiana State University will host the second Southern Regional Dairy Challenge Nov. 15-17, 2007. If you have questions about next year's contest, contact Gary Hay at ghay@agctr.lsu.edu, or Albert De Vries at devries@ufl.edu. To become a sponsor, contact Hay. All contributions are tax deductible to the full extent of the law. Contributing sponsor listings are available at www.dairychallenge.org.

The Southern Regional Dairy Challenge is under the guidance and support of the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge, which was established in April 2002, as a management contest to incorporate evaluation of all aspects of a specific dairy business. For more information, call 217-485-3441 or visit www.dairychallenge.org.

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