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Midwest Dairy Challenge draws 87 students to Wisconsin

The Third Annual Midwest Dairy Challenge, which ran January 25-27, 2007 attracted 87 students from 13 universities and colleges to the heart of America's Dairyland in Fond du Lac, Wis. Both of these numbers are a large increase from last year, with several schools attending for the first time.

"This year we were able to provide a valuable learning experience for students from 13 schools across the Midwest," said Contest Chair Kylie Daniels from ADM Alliance Nutrition Inc. "There was a significant increase in both the number of schools and students attending to the point where we needed to work with three dairies this year. I think this really proves how valuable the contest is becoming to each student's education."

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 was held at Moraine Park Technical College and hosted by the school, as well as University of Wisconsin-Extension Service personnel and North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge (NAIDC) board members Linda Hodorff of Second Look Holsteins LLC, Eden, Wis., and JoDee Sattler of DairyBusiness Communications, Hartland, Wis. It included students from Iowa State University, Lakeshore Technical College, Michigan State University, North Dakota State University, Northwest Missouri State University, Ohio State University, Purdue University, South Dakota State University, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

After they arrived, students joined their new teammates and participated in team-building and personality training with Jim Henion from Cooperative Resources International. The activities were designed to foster communication among team members so they could more effectively work together.

Following this, a panel of area consultants explained how they go about their jobs on a daily basis. The participants were given advice on what to look for when they arrived at a dairy, as well as specific recommendations on how to evaluate the farm's records.

The next day, students were given two hours to evaluate one of three dairies located in the Fond du Lac area. Red Tail Ridge Dairy is a 750-cow freestall operation located near Malone that is owned by John and Diane Thome. Expansion to the current herd size was done in several stages, beginning in 2002. The rolling herd average is currently more than 26,000 pounds of milk. The Thomes farm nearly 1,000 acres and have dairied in the area since 1963.

Just a few miles from Red Tail Ridge is 3D Dairy, owned by John, Linda, Joe and Bill Diederichs. 3D Dairy was built in 2000 after brothers, John, Joe and Bill, made the decision to combine their three separate herds into one facility. Today, the herd numbers 820 cows, and the brothers farm more than 1,750 acres.

The third farm that hosted students was Ruedinger Farms, located near Van Dyne. The farm is owned by John and Karen Ruedinger, who milk 690 cows and farm about 1,200 acres. The dairy employs 12 full-time workers.

After the farm visits, herd owners 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. Shelly Mayer, Slinger, Wis., from the Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin offered media training sessions during the day.

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 three teams as platinum winners, the contest's highest distinction. The individuals who comprised these teams are: Iowa State – Laura Leazer and Lydia Moeller; Michigan State – Johnny Verhaar; Purdue University – Alicia Lee; South Dakota State – Heather Rollefson and Janora Smith; Southwest Wisconsin Technical College – Ron Aldrich; University of Illinois – Ryan Graham, John Mitchell and Kristin Morgan; University of Wisconsin-Madison – Shannon Dwyer, Jay Janowski and Chrissy Wendorf; and University of Wisconsin-River Falls – Amanda Koehler.

The North American Dairy Challenge was established as a management contest to incorporate all phases of a specific dairy business. It strives to incorporate a higher-learning atmosphere with practical application to help prepare students for dairy industry careers. Supported financially through generous donations by industry and coordinated by a volunteer board of directors, the first NAIDC was held in April 2002.

For more information on the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge, call 217-485-3441, e-mail naidcmjk@aol.com, or visit www.dairychallenge.org.

