

ANR FIELD SUCCESS STORY

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Administrative Area:

Northwest

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POW Number & Title:

Dairy POW 110

Quarter – during which program occurred:

2nd (Jan-Mar 2008)

Title of Success Story:

Dairy Focus Groups Involve Producers in Decision-making and Action Plans

Problem Statement:

Between 2000-2008, a positive outlook and market forces drove dairy and growth in NW Iowa, resulting in expansion of some existing farms and the appearance of new farms built by producers relocating to the area. Despite the growth and positive press, extension workers noted that dairy education events were under-attended by a majority of dairy producers in the region's dairy community. Random and occasional comments suggested that positive outlook was not necessarily pervasive throughout dairy community, and that economic growth gained by new farms might be offset by loss of small and medium farms that could not meet financial or management challenges.

Programmatic Response:

1. Intentional Needs assessment discussions were held via in person farm visits and preliminary group discussions in Summer and Fall 2007 to determine the key concerns of owners of small and medium size dairies. Producers stated concern about ability to keep farms profitable and competitive; producers stated concerns about challenge to balance work and family time/recreation; producers state concerns about difficulty of sorting out various options and about uncertainty to make good decisions, and about inability to make progress on an idea or improvement.
2. Based on needs assessment information, plans were made to develop and deliver a 4-part Focus Group Series on Decision-Making, with the owners of small and medium size dairies in Sioux County, Cherokee County area, and Sac County area as the target audience.

3. Between December 2007 and March 2008, 3 groups of the producers from the counties listed above met for lunch time sessions (11:30am – 2:30pm). The discussion topics and activities included Setting a Long Range Vision for Self, Family, and Farm; Setting Goals; Sifting through Options to Set Priorities; Making an Action Plan.
4. Since many of the concerns and goals producers set dealt with farm financial status, group leaders introduced participants to resources available to figure cost of production (Dairy Trans model), do a general financial analysis (Dairy Trans and FinPack), connect with local dairy accountants, compare financial status to benchmarks. Participants also learned about herd management systems and lower cost facilities improvements that offer strategies for improved profitability for small/medium size farms, ie pasture systems and low-cost parlor improvements.

Impact/Outcome:

The informal discussion format succeeded in getting producers in the room that previously never or rarely attended a dairy education meeting. Furthermore, the camaraderie and sharing of stories, ideas, projects seemed to spark hopeful attitudes and commitment to the group. In a preliminary evaluation, several expressed renewed hope and enthusiasm for the future of their dairy farms.

Dairy producers attending the Focus Group sessions participated in discussions and written work to complete statements describing their Long Range Vision, and a listing of their short term goals. Several committed to specific actions in the area of financial management or dairy herd management, and follow through to complete this work will be underway Spring-Fall 2008:

- a. 20 participants elect to complete Dairy Trans financial analysis and participate in a financial benchmarking session
- b. 10 participants are in progress with plans to upgrade cow housing/milking center/calf area/manure storage facilities
- c. 8 participants identified interest to complete a farm transition and succession plan
- d. 16 participants indicate interest in a local or regional tour to view modern dairy facilities for ideas on cow housing, milking center, pasture management systems, manure management systems, youngstock systems, and people management systems

While much work and follow-through needs to be done yet, it seems likely that these farms that complete a transition/succession plan and/or a significant building upgrade are going to be farms that have an increased chance for survival and sustainability into the next generation.