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Milk Matters

a column by **Joseph O'Donnell**

Assurance program is good news

If you pick up any publication covering agriculture in California's Central Valley, you'll probably find a story about dairy production and the environment - and it won't likely be a positive one.

Dairymen wanting to move into the area to build large dairy operations are finding strong resistance from a local population afraid of water and air pollution. The situation has gotten to be like an argument over religion with both sides already set in their attitudes and perspectives.

Lack of data

The challenge in coming to a proper conclusion is the general lack of data on the issues. Dairy producers have paid for initial groundwater and air studies conducted by the University of California at Davis and California State University Fresno. But, these studies mark just the beginning of what is necessary. Much of the producer support comes from the California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB) but as a marketing order, there are USDA restrictions on how much on-farm environmental research they can support. Thus, additional research will be slow in coming.

That isn't to say there aren't very positive efforts in the works. After all, dairy families are just as concerned with preserving clean air and water as their neighbors.

Luckily, back in 1997, the industry had the foresight to proactively address the environmental and regulatory concerns of consumers and producers alike by forming the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program (CDQAP). CMAB and 14 other organizations formed this voluntary producer education program with the purpose of assisting dairy producers in navigating the state's many environmental requirements. Initially, three areas of focus were identified - environmental stewardship, animal health and welfare, and food safety - with the list expanding as necessary over time.

Shortcourse offered

One of the first goals of CDQAP was to compile all the water regulations required of dairy producers by the environmental agencies. This data was then assembled and a three-day shortcourse was offered to educate producers on how to be in compliance with the regulations. A third-party evaluation was also offered and a certificate awarded at the end of the process. Since its rollout, more than 200 California dairies have completed the coursework and had a favorable evaluation to receive certification.

With each certificate awarded and sign posted, the dairyman and the industry as a whole is sending a message to consumers, neighbors and regulators that there is a strong commitment to staying in compliance with all reg-

FYI

Dr. Joseph O'Donnell is executive director of the *California Dairy Research Foundation*. He can be reached at 530-753-0681.

Information on the *California Dairy Research Foundation* can be obtained from the organization's web site at www.cdraf.org.

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ulations. This can do a lot to dispel the concerns about a new dairy moving into the neighborhood.

Consumer confidence isn't the only benefit of CDQAP certification. Certified dairies can receive a 50% water fee reduction. Also, some processors offer financial incentives to producers who become certified. Any processor growing his business needs a secure and expanding source of milk. Encouraging shippers to do all they can to avoid U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) action works to the advantage of everyone - producers, processors and consumers.

Throughout its eight-year history, CDQAP has expanded and grown to

address industry needs. In addition to the three primary modules, a John's Disease module was added. Last year, the Environmental Stewardship module broadened its scope to include air regulations.

In 2004, more than 700 producers attended a series of 17 workshops to learn about new air quality regulations affecting the eight counties that make up the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Again, producers through CMAB are supporting some research at CSU Fresno and UC Davis, which is critical to answering the questions and developing reasonable guidelines. However, much more is required than can be supported through a marketing organization.

When it comes to consumer concerns, animal health and welfare can be

the issue that makes or breaks an industry. CDQAP's educational module on animal welfare is near completion and has produced a guide to dairy welfare evaluation. It is available online at www.cdqa.org/ahw.

Once data from the three comparison programs have been compiled, the participating dairies will provide a window of possible compliance and, if necessary, prepare dairies for the possibility of a third-party evaluation for national retailers as suggested by industry associations.

As new homeland and food security programs are developed to protect our food supply, CDQAP is playing an integral role in representing industry interests. The program itself offers the dairy industry a way to show their concern for the issues affecting consumers.

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