

GUEST COLUMNIST



CMN Exclusive!



Perspective: Ingredient Technology

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Balancing nutrition and the environment

Dairy products play a key role in elevating the nutritional status of a population. As a culture develops economically, one of the first items of business is eating better which translates to adding more animal protein to the diet, including dairy products. There still are many of the world's stomachs not getting filled regularly, yet alone well. The economics of providing nutrient-dense foods greatly influence the resulting nutrient status of a population. Because the cost of production can affect the

health of a nation, it is important to keep production costs low—but at what price?

When calculating the true cost of milk production, the costs that air and water emissions have on the environment often have been overlooked. The fact is, we have been bargaining with our air and water quality for nutrition for years and now it is time to find a way of doing both—reducing air and water quality trade-offs without unduly raising the cost of milk production. As a society, we have an obligation to produce food as cheaply as

possible while maintaining solid stewardship of our environment.

For many groups with their own agenda, this means immediate and restrictive regulation on milk production regardless of the impact.

Instead, this complex balancing act requires a systematic approach. What are the numbers? Where are the “chemicals” impacting air and water quality coming from? When do these compounds change from being recycled nutrients to pollutants and what management practices can be implemented to keep these chemicals as nutrients? The key to unraveling these questions and coming up with practical solutions isn't in regulation for regulation's sake, it is in applying solid research to balancing the chemistry of the environment. Only then will we be able to control the recycling of nutrients to be able to deliver nature's most nutritional product—milk—at a cost even the poorest among us can afford.

The preamble to our Constitution says we are to “promote the general welfare.” This applies to our food systems as well and should include both environmental AND nutritional welfare. In fact, we need to elevate this debate to bring the representatives of nutritional programs into the environmental stew-

ardship discussion. So far, I have not seen anyone from the state or federal Departments of Health and Human Services or overseas buyers of our dairy products sitting at the table. When it comes to balancing environmental issues while minimizing the cost of food production, no one agency, consumer group or industry will be able to resolve it on their own. It will take teamwork.

This is just as important for the processor as it is for the rest of the industry. After all, how does the cost of milk affect your business? It's clear that we need a new approach to environmental stewardship but the picture is much bigger. In economic-speak, the global demand for dairy products is elastic. As the price goes up, sales go down. As sales go down, however, the nutritional status of a population declines. Unless we get this system balanced (and we need BOTH—a clean environment and solid nutrition for good health), our dairy industry will face an uncertain future and our customers—both domestic and overseas—will suffer.

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