



## Perspective: Ingredient Technology

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# Consumer perceptions of environmental stewardship critical for dairy's future

These days we are seeing a growing level of appreciation for the role dairy products play in overall nutrition. That good news, however, is being trumped by the constraints some groups would like to place on milk production due to unscientifically supported concerns over the environment.

Consumer perception of the nutritional value of dairy products, especially for parents, is at the heart of the fact that most U.S. households contain dairy products of some kind. Beyond that, dairy producer investment in nutritional research has given us many positive stories to tell about dairy, ranging from

osteoporosis prevention to weight management to new data on the role of milk in easing symptoms of PMS. Meanwhile, members of the hydrogenated oil industry are seeing their work catch up to them in the form of *trans* fats — the fats used to replace natural milkfat — which are actually much more deleterious to health than any natural fat.

While it's proven that the dairy industry's cohesive check-off funded efforts to convey the clear nutritional advantages of dairy over many foods has been effective, we can't rest on our laurels. We still need to make products that meet the needs and lifestyles of consum-

ers. That is working too. The dairy foods research centers across the country are working hand-in-hand with dairy processors to deliver the technology necessary to put new products on the shelf.

And yet milk production is growing at a fairly slow pace in the United States. Falling overseas production coupled with increasing demand from countries with improving economies and a desire to eat better is creating a salesman's worst nightmare: a demand that outstrips supply.

At the same, despite growing demand, there are many popular misperceptions about the dairy industry among consumers.

What is constraining U.S. milk production today and threatens to give our industry a black eye? Two words: environmental stewardship.

If you take a look at history and the dairies lost in the Midwest you might wonder — how much was due to environmental pressure? In the west, the largest constraints on getting the permits necessary to build or expand a dairy revolve around environmental stewardship.

It starts with the consumer. Unfortunately, it is fairly easy for advocacy groups to sell consumers on the notion that dairies pollute the air and water of their communities. Whatever their motivation, these nonprofit, high-payroll groups pressure the legislature, regulators and the courts to limit dairy growth. While just about any reasonably intelligent person can tell you the major source of

air pollution in California's Central Valley is the car and truck traffic, the hammer is landing squarely on the shoulders of the dairy industry. Why? Because we don't have the data to defend ourselves. Everyone in the industry — from processors to producers, even delivery truck drivers — is under the microscope. The sheer size of the industry itself attracts this attention.

I live in the Central Valley and am as interested in protecting our environment here and elsewhere as anyone — including dairy producers. I also am a scientist and need data in order to act or direct action. This is where our greatest production challenge lies — in our ability to provide the correct, responsible data to be able to counter any consumer misconceptions in a thoughtful way and to offer solutions to real problems.

Environmental stewardship has little to do with increasing milk production efficiency but everything to do with supplying a finished product with value to consumers. Dairy products are necessary to maintain the nutritional status of our population here and abroad. Research activity is underway and will grow quickly in this area. Be a participant — your consumers are counting on you.

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