

GETTING REAL ON GREENHOUSE GASES

Converting grass into the most nutritious product on earth is a feat of nature that has kept our population well nourished for centuries. Dairy producers appreciate this and know how important their product is to the health of their family, community and country. A poorly nourished society easily loses its productivity and will suffer in many ways, not just economically.



Bringing nutrition to the world
In order for the dairy industry to maintain its ability to bring nutrition to the world it needs to constantly evaluate itself. Like any business, dairy needs to identify all true costs of doing business and then work to minimize those costs to achieve greater efficiency – this includes costs to the environment. Environmental costs confront all industries and individuals. You can't leave your house without having some effect on the world. That said, when evaluating costs we have to be working with real numbers to have a real effect.

Outrageous inaccuracy
Methane from cows is a common topic in the media. Some of the figures used are absolutely outrageous in their inaccuracy. And people take it at face value. Take a closer look. All of the dairy methane originated with cow's feed. That includes hay grown in areas that can produce little else in the way of crops, including food crops. Corn is another part of dairy feed but, unlike humans, instead of eating just the ear and leaving

the stalks and husks behind to rot and produce greenhouse gases that are not utilized; the cow eats the entire plant and harnesses a good part of that energy to produce one of the most nutrient dense food packages available.

Byproducts produced
Consider all of the byproducts produced by the vegetable, nut and fruit industries – they find their way into dairy feed where more energy is extracted. And, the methane produced by these dairy cows can be converted to energy. But that's another story. Even without a system for converting methane into energy, the cow has reduced the greenhouse gas impact of producing all of that human food necessary for our survival while producing one of the essential food groups. Talk about efficient!

When the number crunchers start adding up the greenhouse gases produced by dairy cows they need to add another column to deduct the greenhouse gases that weren't produced by rotting byproducts. Why do we never see that calculation? (Of course, the beef folks or any ruminant industry could make a similar argument. And they should.) People tend to look only at what gases are produced by an industry like dairy without looking at what gas production was avoided by putting that energy into milk or meat or in some places – even draught.

Dairy farmers can stand proud of their role in balancing the ecology of the world. Without ruminants, all life would change including the environmental life of the planet. In ruminants, we have a system that brings mammalian life together with the bacterial and plant worlds in ways that conserve energy by extracting it from material otherwise

destined for greenhouse gas production. Greenhouse gases are kept in check and energy is recycled from nutritionally useless grass and other plants into highly nutritious food for humans (and many other animals on the food chain). Proper management of this natural conversion of non-edible plants and green waste to human food not only balances the environment but advances the nutritional status of all people. And we keep getting better at it. Dairy today is more efficient and sustainable than 60 years ago while feeding more people.

New ways to reduce GHGs
Dairymen are environmentalists – naturally; and they keep getting better. Research continues to find ways to capture and reduce the greenhouse gases produced by cows. There will always be those who are motivated by the almighty buck who try to pick out steps in the system and take things out of context in order to deceive people or create controversy.

Don't fall for it. Dairy producers feed the world; dairy producers balance the environment; dairy producers make their communities and their country strong by intelligently managing the natural systems entrusted to them. Awesome responsibility; awesome people. □

FYI

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