



# Dairy Cares Report

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## Re-establishing consumer trust vital to future of California's dairy families

American consumers know how to eat, but ever fewer have “hands-on” knowledge of where their food comes from (“the supermarket, right?”). That’s hardly news: Farmers and livestock ranchers have been facing the challenge of educating an increasingly “citified” public for nearly a century, as more and more people live and work in urban areas while relying on fewer and fewer farmers to feed them.

Lately, this challenge seems to be getting a little steeper. The recent film “Food, Inc.” and the just-published *Time* (Aug. 21 issue) article, “Getting real about the high price of cheap food,” are examples of the growing number of questions proliferating in the mass media about how food is produced – and who is responsible for it.

There is a good story to tell for dairy families and many others who produce our nation’s food. Dairy farmers have been innovators for decades, producing an affordable, plentiful, reliable and safe supply of milk and dairy products to hundreds of millions of Americans every single day. These same dairy families produce a daily bounty of products while implementing sustainable farming practices. They use manure, a natural fertilizer, to grow crops, balancing nutrients to protect soil and water, and managing their farms to reduce air emissions and be good neighbors. Dairy families also remain dedicated to caring for the animals that provide milk and meat to sustain millions of people.

Unfortunately, that’s not always the story we hear. Critics point out that marketing efforts portray an image of farming that doesn’t resemble reality. It is normal for marketers of everything from bacon to breadsticks to cover their packaging with sentimental images of farming landscapes, such as red, wood-frame barns and grassy hillsides.

To state the obvious, farms in general – and dairies specifically – don’t look like they did 50 or 100 years ago. Wooden barns have been replaced with steel structures, with improved sanitation to reduce the labor and energy needed to keep dairy barns clean and animals healthy. Breeding and feeding has improved dramatically, resulting in healthier animals that produce more milk. More milk from fewer cows contributes to a smaller environmental footprint. It’s instructive to

recall that the U.S. has nearly two-thirds fewer cows than it did during World War II, but has nevertheless increased milk production to meet the needs of an ever-growing population.

Some choose to view this change in a negative light, implying that because a farm is larger than it was decades ago, and because the barn does not look like it was painted by Norman Rockwell, the farm is no longer a farm but a “factory.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

California’s milk is produced on nearly 1,800 dairies, virtually all family-owned and operated. Many have been in the business for generations. To compete in the modern world, these families have innovated. The changes they’ve adopted are not negatives but positives to improve their ability to care for animals and the environment while producing a safe and plentiful supply of dairy products.

Even more important: while the style of dairying has changed through modern innovations, the core values of the California dairy family have remained. Today’s family dairies hold the same values of their hardworking predecessors. The compassion, responsibility and respect that guided dairies of 100 or 200 cows in the past are the same values that guide dairies with 1,000 or even 5,000 cows today.

As we continue to tell the story of California dairy farmers, we must be certain that consumers get an accurate picture of the dedication that goes into caring for animals and the land, while providing safe, reliable, plentiful and affordable food. Recently, two national dairy organizations, Dairy Management Inc. (DMI) and National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF), announced they will launch the National Dairy FARM Program: *Farmers Assuring Responsible Management*, later this year. Dairy Cares representatives this month met with DMI and NMPF to discuss the developing efforts and to provide a California perspective. This FARM program offers a potential avenue for today’s dairy families to re-connect with consumers, and demonstrate the shared values held by farmers and consumers when it comes to responsible, humane animal care.

Dairy Cares applauds the efforts of DMI and NMPF in taking steps to develop a program that will allow dairy farmers to reinforce with consumers what they already know and practice, including proper animal care and treatment, environmental sustainability and a continuing dedication to producing the finest dairy products in the world. Continuing to achieve these goals, and making sure that consumers are educated about our efforts, is vital to the economic future of California dairy farm families.

*Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability for California’s dairy industry. Our members include the Alliance of Western Milk Producers, Bank of the West, Bar 20 Dairy Farms, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-Western Area Council, Dairy Institute of California, Hilmar Cheese Co., HP Hood, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O’Lakes, Milk Producers Council, Western United Dairymen, and others. For information about Dairy Cares, visit our web site at [www.dairycares.com](http://www.dairycares.com), write [dairycares@aol.com](mailto:dairycares@aol.com) or call 916-441-3318.*