



Dairy Cares Report

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Measuring progress as California dairies ramp up efforts to protect water quality

California dairy families have undertaken a historic effort to protect water resources across the Central Valley, and the good news is, they are making significant progress. More than two years ago, state water quality officials adopted the nation's toughest water quality protection measures. Since then, dairy operators have swung into action, teaming up with regulators and experts from the state's universities, private sector and others to get the job done.

While the regulations are lengthy and complex, the goal is simple: Proper management of manure from dairy cows. Some choose to describe manure as "waste," but this simply isn't accurate. Manure is a valuable agricultural resource, which when used properly and in harmony with growing crops, is a natural organic fertilizer and soil builder. Nevertheless, this resource must be managed carefully. That means storing manure properly until it is ready to use, and then making sure it is applied to crops at proper rates and timing, to minimize risk of runoff or over-application.

To achieve this seemingly simple goal takes experience, skill and training. Dairy operators must not only be experts at caring for their cows and producing high-quality milk – they also have to be excellent, skilled crop farmers. That means taking extensive samples of harvested crops, manure, soil and water so they can be sure that the nutrients (fertilizer) applied to the growing crops are in balance with the needs of the plants. In addition, farmers carefully manage irrigation to prevent runoff.

To date, California dairy operators have already developed "nutrient management plans" which describe the types of crops grown on their farms, amounts of nutrients applied, and regular testing to ensure that a proper balance is maintained. Much time and effort – and a great deal of money – has been invested to comply with the new regulations. Dairy operators and their associations have also worked collaboratively through efforts such as the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program (www.cdqa.org), which has provided thousands of hours of free classroom education to dairy farmers, their employees and dairy industry professionals to increase understanding of the regulations and provide helpful tools, guidance and assistance in reaching compliance.

Some of the most complex and difficult requirements are still to come. An important goal going forward – and a requirement under the new regulations – is to monitor the effectiveness of these management measures in actually protecting water resources. This is important: Dairy families need to know their hard work and investment is protecting the water we all depend on, and that their

investment is not being wasted. The people of California also want to know that ever-scarcer water supplies, central to our economy's future health, are managed and protected.

To realize this goal, the regulations call for groundwater monitoring so that water quality trends can be measured and the effectiveness of management activities can be verified. Unfortunately, groundwater monitoring is extraordinarily expensive and can place a huge financial burden on dairy farm families, even as they struggle to survive in a tough economic climate that has driven many toward bankruptcy.

For this reason, Dairy Cares coalition members are now working closely with the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, technical experts and other stakeholders to develop a groundwater monitoring alternative plan that, if successful, will reduce costs significantly while providing needed water quality data more efficiently, quickly and effectively. We believe this effort is progressing and we hope to develop the plan and provide further details through our member organizations in coming weeks and months – dairy producers should watch their trade association newsletters and CDQAP bulletins for additional details.

For now, it is important to remember that California dairy families have already made significant progress in water quality protection and continue to be hard at work, every day, in meeting this responsibility. Consumers, too, can be proud when they consume milk or dairy produced in California, knowing that those products come from farms that meet the toughest environmental standards in the nation.

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, write dairycares@aol.com or call 916-441-3318.