



Dairy Cares Report

December 2009

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New Year presents challenge, opportunity to better demonstrate animal care efforts

Without question, 2009 presented serious economic challenges for America's dairy farmers and no doubt many will bid the year, "good riddance." With signs that the economy may be beginning to improve, many are hoping for a chance to make up for losses suffered over what has been an extremely tough year.

Though the economy took up the front page, 2009 should also be remembered as the year animal care and treatment took a much larger role in the public discussion. This past year saw public interest spike over how livestock animals are raised and treated. And what the public saw didn't always look very good. Examples included an undercover video at a Pennsylvania dairy farm in September, depicting unsanitary conditions and cows that were unable to walk. This was followed by the October release of another video secretly recorded at a Vermont veal processing plant, depicting inhumane handling of day-old calves. Both were reminders of the 2008 incident at a Hallmark meat packing facility in Southern California, where a video recording of a downed cow being moved with a forklift helped to prompt the recall of 143 million pounds of beef, the largest in history. The Hallmark video now is regularly featured in advertisements by the Humane Society of the United States as they appeal for donations and new members.

The 2009 feature film "Food, Inc." didn't draw large audiences to theaters, but gave opponents of livestock agriculture (and conventional agriculture in general) an opportunity to bring the debate to television talk shows and communicate through newspapers about their issues with "big agriculture." Various legislative and voter initiatives throughout the country also fueled the conversation about the state of farm animal well-being. It is clear that as 2010 approaches, the debate remains far from over.

It has become commonplace to try to characterize large livestock operations, including large dairies, as "factory farms," and to attempt to characterize these operations as being operated by cold, callous, uncaring corporations.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Dairies across California, large or small, are family-owned and operated. Many have been in business for generations. Dairying is a special occupation that appeals to hardworking people who put a high priority on caring for animals.

But knowing the truth isn't the same thing as telling it. For this reason, agriculture and food groups are investing in new efforts to relay accurate information to consumers about where their food comes from.

In 2010, dairy farmers across the nation will begin in earnest participating in the National Dairy FARM (*Farmers Assuring Responsible Management*) program, developed by National Milk Producers Federation and Dairy Management Inc.

At its heart, the program is a powerful tool to assist dairies in documenting the many efforts made daily to properly provide for health, comfort and care of dairy animals. National Dairy FARM provides a way for our farm families to independently verify their responsible animal husbandry practices while building consumer confidence in America's dairy products and the families that produce them. And in those rare instances when animals may not be properly cared for, FARM provides a set of standards and methods for verification that will allow for identifying and correcting problems.

Dairy Cares members are actively working together to launch the National Dairy FARM Program in California. Through participation in the FARM program, 2010 can be remembered as the year dairy families took advantage of an important opportunity to step forward and tell their side of the story.

Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care and treatment within the California 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, or call 916-441-3318.