



Dairy Cares Report

June 2010

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Dairy month also marks significant progress in water quality protection by California dairies

June is National Dairy Month, when we take time to recognize the contribution of dairy farmers and dairy products to our society. Most of us recognize the critical importance of affordable, nutritious dairy products to our long-term health, food security and the economic well-being of millions of American families.

As important as these contributions are, June also marks an important milestone in the environmental stewardship of California dairy families. It has now been three years since the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board adopted the nation's strictest water quality protection measures for dairies. Since then, dairy families have been working hard to meet this new challenge, continually improving their environmental stewardship along the way.

As June comes to a close, Central Valley dairy operators are busy finishing and submitting their dairy facility assessment reports to the Regional Board. These annual reports document a wide variety of actions taken throughout the year to protect groundwater and surface water. These measures include extensive environmental monitoring and laboratory testing of soil, manure, plant tissue and irrigation and well water. This accounting process helps to ensure that manure – a valuable renewable resource that builds soil and fertilizes crops – is used properly, applied at appropriate times and in amounts that balance with the needs of growing crops.

But that is only a part of the new requirements. This year, Central Valley dairy operators also submitted engineering plans to assure their dairy facilities are properly designed and operated when it comes to handling and storage of manure and process water.

These efforts are important but don't come cheap. Dairy families spend hundreds of hours, and thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars each year to comply with the new regulations, including utilizing the services of engineers and other technical experts to help get the job done.

With all this work, it's fair to say that California dairies remain ahead of the curve in their environmental stewardship efforts, using innovative practices to protect air and water quality and properly care for their animals, while remaining economically competitive. And there is a

growing recognition that similar efforts will be needed from farmers nationwide if agriculture is to meet the needs of a growing population without adversely impacting the environment.

On June 29, the prestigious National Research Council's Committee on Twenty-First Century Agriculture released a landmark report, "Toward Sustainable Agricultural Systems in the 21st Century." The report concludes that "if U.S. agricultural production is to meet the long-term adequacy of food, fiber, feed and biofuels under scarce or declining resources ... agriculture will have to substantially accelerate progress" toward sustainable practices.

Among the specific practices the report recommends for implementation or further study are several currently already in common practice at California dairies. Just a few of these include:

- Use of manure, compost or green manure to reduce use of synthetic fertilizer
- Combined livestock and farming operations to reduce import/transport of fertilizer and feed inputs
- Soil and plant tissue testing and Nutrient Management Plans
- Water re-use, conservation and recycling
- Resource conservation – examples include using by-products from other nearby agricultural operations as feed, such as almond hulls, cotton seeds or culled produce
- Genetic improvement of livestock through breeding to improve animal health and welfare, while reducing manure and nutrients excreted per unit of food produced

California dairy families are also experimenting with many other practices to improve sustainability, such as precision farming and conservation tillage. These lower fuel and water use, while reducing air quality impacts from windblown dust and agricultural vehicle exhaust. Valley dairies also operate under the nation's strictest air quality protection rules.

So as we remember the contributions of California dairy families to our tables, this is also a good time to acknowledge and applaud the efforts of dairies across California to do their part to protect the environment and improve the environmental and economic sustainability of the state's 1,750 family-owned dairies. These ongoing efforts are an important step toward ensuring that all Americans will continue to enjoy nutritious, delicious and affordable dairy products for generations to come – while our state continues to reap the hundreds of thousands of jobs and other economic benefits created by a healthy, sustainable California dairy industry.

Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care. 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, Ruan Transport Corp., Western United Dairymen, and others. For information, visit our web site or call 916-441-3318.