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Sustainability. It's Our Future.

Why I'm Speaking at the California Dairy Sustainability Summit

Written by Jared Fernandes, Tulare County Dairy Farmer

I was recently asked to speak at the [California Dairy Sustainability Summit](#), on a panel about who's driving sustainability. My initial response was that I'm not sure I'm your guy.

I like to joke that the dairy farmer perspective on sustainability is, "It's all bull#\$@!" I don't mean that manure management is a key part of the equation, although that's true too. I mean that it gets to be a lot to sort through as a dairy farmer.

Sustainability is more than a buzzword. It seems like everyone today is watching us and wanting to measure how "sustainable" our farms are. We've got sustainability goals as an industry, customers who have goals for us, and we also have all of California's environmental policies. There's a lot to sustainability (efficiency, climate, air quality, water use and groundwater protection, soil health, etc.). It's complicated.

When I step back and think of the big picture, it is clear that as California dairy farmers, we are leaders in sustainability. And in all seriousness, dairy sustainability isn't a joking matter for us. It's about being able to carry on the traditions of our ancestors, to continue the work that we love and that nourishes lives, and to pass our farms down to the next generation. We can't do these things without both sustainable practices and sound financial strategies.

My beliefs on sustainability are skewed heavily toward farm economics. I farm in partnership with two of my brothers, and I'm the numbers guy. While Josh's passion is cows, Frank's is farming the land, and I'm the one in the office crunching numbers. We're part of a third-generation dairy family. Our legacy began when our grandfather immigrated to California from the Azores islands, Portugal, around 1920, working on farms and eventually starting his own dairy.

We've got enough of a family history to know that economic resilience is what keeps the dream alive. But we also know that we need to care for our land and our animals in ways that will allow them to continue to provide for us. My brothers and I are proud of what we have accomplished in terms of sustainable practices.

Here's some of the things you'll find on our farm, Legacy Ranch: In 2019, we partnered with Calgren Renewable Fuels to install a methane digester, which creates renewable natural gas to power the local ethanol plant, with excess gas helping fuel renewable natural gas trucks. We've been early adopters of several practices to boost soil health, including reduced tillage and cover cropping (when we have had enough water available). Our farm is powered by a one-megawatt solar system. We feed our cows a special, essential oils product, known as Agolin, as part of their nutritious diet, which helps cows to more efficiently produce milk while reducing enteric methane emissions. We were able to make each one of these decisions to become more sustainable because they also made financial sense.



Frank, Jared, and Josh Fernandes partner in owning and operating Legacy Ranches in Tulare County.

Another important factor in these decisions has been an understanding of California's ever-increasingly progressive environmental regulations, and a need to stay ahead of the challenges they create. Namely, California dairy farmers face the toughest regulatory and business conditions, as compared to our counterparts producing milk in other states.

Unfortunately, it's getting a lot harder to think about making more investments in the farm because it's harder to plan our future. For our farm, the biggest threat is water availability as the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) is implemented. Dairies also face significant challenges with tightening water quality regulations. There are technical solutions to think about investing in, but it's hard to make a five-year business plan anymore if we don't know how changing regulations will impact us.

There have been opportunities to receive private and/or public support for sustainability investments. These have been key to our farm's success too. Grants and crediting programs remain critically important. However, significant dollars of our own are also required. To be able to make those investments, we need to know that we can keep our farms in operation.

So, will I speak at the 2025 California Dairy Sustainability Summit? Yes. Let me tell you why. Let's go back to the question, "Who's driving sustainability?" I'd like it to be the dairy farmers. My brothers and I have tried to be forward-looking and progressive. Yet, we're still wondering how we're going to meet the regulatory challenges that are coming hard and fast. The one thing we have always relied on is getting involved in our communities and within the industry.

For the past several years, the California Dairy Sustainability Summit has helped bring attention to California dairy farmers' leadership and the need for practical, workable approaches to continue advancing planet-smart practices. This year's event is in Visalia, within the heart of dairy country, because we aim to leave no one behind. We as farmers are going to have to work together and with our public and private partners because we're all in this sustainability game together.

While it seems like much is out of our control, we need to make sure we always keep a seat at the table. We need to understand the landscape in which we are operating, and how both state and local policies, along with customer expectations, will continue to affect business. We need to know where we can find financial resources, technical solutions, and the good advice of a neighbor or fellow farmer. I want to stand beside my fellow dairy farmers and make sure we can pass our legacies down to the next generation.

There's a lot of opportunities in sustainability. There's a lot of great progress being made to better protect the planet, and that is something that we as farmers should be proud of. We also need to be proud of the simple fact that we make fresh, local products that people love. Dairy helps people, young and old and in between, get the nutrients they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives. Dairy farms support jobs for an incredible industry, 180,000 jobs strong in California. We add cultural and economic richness to the state. And we are doing so using the most sustainable dairy farm practices anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, we still face harsh, blatantly inaccurate criticism from activists who wish we would just disappear.

Yes, it's a lot to sort through. But, it's not just a bunch of BS. It's our future. Let's figure out how we're going to make it work.

Fellow dairy farmers, please join me at the California Dairy Sustainability Summit on March 25.

Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care. Our members include Bar 20 Dairy Farms, Clover Sonoma, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Dairy Research Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America, Dairy Institute of California, F & R Ag Services, Hilmar Cheese Company, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O'Lakes, Inc, Milk Producers Council, Valley Milk, LLC, Yosemite Farm Credit, Zenith Insurance Company, and others. For information, visit DairyCares.com. To subscribe to the newsletter, contact news@dairycares.com.

