



GUEST COLUMN FROM SECRETARY BRANCEL: Lessons Learned Should Guide Dairy's Future

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Below is a guest column from Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Secretary Ben Brancel:

MADISON – Over the past month, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection focused on finding a short-term solution for the dozens of Wisconsin dairy farm families who suddenly lost their milk market. Thankfully on May 1, 99% of the milk had found a new home, at least temporarily. While we will continue to assist farmers through the Wisconsin Farm Center, it is now time for us as an industry to keep the conversation going and look long-term. The lessons we have learned should be what guides the future of Wisconsin's dairy industry. The current situation has shown us all the importance of communication.

Lesson #1: Communication with processors

Communication needs to start between the farmer and the processor. Processing plants and farmers will have to work together directly to determine how much milk is needed. We cannot produce milk that does not have a final market. These decisions need to be made by industry and not mandated by government. It is important that if a farmer is considering making a management change to increase milk production, that information is communicated to the processor and trusted advisors, including the lender and accountant, before investments are made. When lenders ask farmers to consider how they can increase cash flow, the first instinct cannot be to add more cows if the processor cannot handle the additional milk.

The connection between the farmer and the processor will need to be tighter than ever in the future. Even though some farmers contract their milk through a handler, it is still important to know the milk truck's final destination of who the processor is and what products are being made. Agreements and contracts need to lay out the expectations and have terms that are amenable to both parties. Arrangements should be made that benefit both the farmer and the processor.

Lesson #2: Communication with consumers

Milk is transformed by processing plants and value is added by making innovative ingredients that go into other products and nutritious dairy foods. Although farmers will rarely get the opportunity to meet the consumer who may live on the other side of the world, it doesn't mean we all shouldn't understand who they are or what they desire.

Consumers have a lot to say about where their food comes from. They have ideas about how animals should be raised or crops grown. As farmers, it is our job to understand their expectations and educate them on the reasons why we do what we do. We may use seeds that allow us to save water or housing systems that keep animals safe.

Research, done by universities and companies, will be vital to meeting different customer specifications. In our promotion and marketing, we need to react to what consumers want. Families may never drink as much milk as they did in the past, but they may buy more protein-packed yogurt and artisan cheeses than ever before.

Lesson #3: Communication with policymakers

Our dairy industry's future depends on free, fair and transparent trade. We must build upon on current trading relationships and identify new ones. We all need to be engaged in policy conversations, interact with decision makers and ensure our voice is heard, sharing what is important to our family farms and local businesses.

Part of the reason Wisconsin's dairy industry is so strong is that our farms are so diverse. It is simple. Some farms are small, and some farms are large. All of Wisconsin's dairy farms rely on a dependable and skilled workforce year-round. Some succeed using low-input strategies such as grazing while

others utilize the latest technology to gain efficiencies. Both production methods have the means to be successful.

Government can't hinder advancement. Local, state and federal governments need to be consistent and predictable in their permitting and enforcement. The regulations and standards need to keep up with advancements in technology, such as ultra-high temperature processing, and be clearly communicated to ensure we have a safe, nutritious and reliable food supply for years to come.

The future

When considering the future of the dairy industry, we will need all the players represented around the farm table; farmers, processors, milk handlers, lenders, agricultural organizations, universities and government officials alike. There needs to be open and honest dialogue about the role we will all play in the years to come.

For more than a century, the words Wisconsin and dairy have gone hand in hand. I truly believe that in another century, long after I'm gone, people will still recognize Wisconsin as the dairy state. Although it may look different, it will still be filled with productive dairy cows, rich soils growing quality feed, and the families that make it all possible. This is a time of opportunity for us in agriculture to learn from the lessons of our past, refocus and move forward together.

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