

Cooperation Is Byword for 'Old Dominion' Dairymen

BY JULIE GOCHENOUR
Virginia Correspondent

Statistics can't tell you everything.

Virginia's dairy industry ranks a modest 18th place in the nation with 1,157 grade-A dairies and about 500 manufacturing milk producers. The state's 158,000 dairy cows produce approximately 175 million pounds of milk per month or 2.1 billion pounds per year with DHIA herds averaging 16,117 pounds per cow annually.

Small potatoes compared to Pennsylvania.

Nonetheless, Virginia is a recognized leader among the dairy states. For the past 15 years, the genetic value of dairy cattle in the state has been in the top 5 percent of the country. The DHIA system used to test milk for somatic cell count was developed in Virginia and first used by the state's dairymen. And Virginia dairy farmers fill many national positions in the industry, from breed association and the DHIA to the United Dairy Industry Association.

But what the numbers don't reveal is the way this industry operates. Behind the facts and figures is a network of active dairymen, milk marketing cooperatives, support industries and a state university (V.P.I.) that consistently work together to reach common goals. Their medium, says Dr. John White, a 19-year veteran of the Dairy Science Dept. at V.P.I., Virginia's land grant university, is often the Virginia State Dairymen's Association.

Formed in 1907, the association has been "the united voice of Virginia's dairy farmers" for the past 79 years. "There are very few states that have a single operation that's non-financial - not profit earning or doesn't market products," White explains. "The Virginia State Dairymen's Association simply serves as a forum and inspiration to promote the industry and things that need to be done in the industry."

Cooperation and coordination among the different segments of the industry have been the chief results, White notes. "Even though we have five different marketing divisions in the state, an A.I. cooperative and two or three private companies, as well as several feed cooperatives and companies, all of those companies - and producers - are represented in the association. So when there are differences on how something should be done, there's a forum to work through those differences and come forward with an industry approach to the issue."

This united approach has paid off in a lot of ways, John Miller, executive secretary and treasurer of the association points out. Three milk marketing cooperatives, Dairymen, Inc., Maryland-Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative and Valley of Virginia Cooperative Milk Producers handle 98 percent of the grade A milk produced in the state, and, while genuine competition exists, there is also a profitable degree of genuine cooperation as well. Two

of the co-ops, for example, share an ice cream facility.

"Our co-ops work well together; they don't fight each other and that is one of the things that makes Virginia's dairy industry unique," Miller adds. "Not only do we have joint ventures between the cooperatives like the Flavo-Rich ice cream plant in Roanoke, but D.I., Valley of Virginia and Maryland-Virginia appreciate and respect each other's ability. This means they can work together and coordinate the many programs in milk marketing to the best advantage of all producer members."

Marketing is not the only area, however, where this cooperation exists. In 1972 the Dairymen's Association recognized the importance of education and research to the health of the industry and consequent shortcomings at V.P.I. Accordingly, the membership voted to establish a set-aside program where \$1.40 from every \$1,000 of milk sold would go to this area. So far the association has put more than \$1.75 million into the Dairy Science and other related departments at V.P.I. Extension, research and teaching have all benefited, as have the dairy farmers supporting the program.

"It's made an unbelievable difference," Dr. White explains. "It's allowed us to attract faculty here that would never have come if we didn't have that support. It's allowed us to assume a leadership role in dairy science nationwide," he continues. "The other thing the State Dairymen's Association has done by funding all of these different ideas, approaches, opinions and such is to lead the industry in the state, the dairy farmers in the state, to be the most progressive anywhere."

"What I mean by that they tend to be early adopters of new technology; they tend to be leaders in their field. For example, they accepted the new genetic technology in the early '70s very early in the game and got ahead of the rest of the country. There are many examples of that in the dairy industry in this state; not only among the dairy farmers, but in the support industries also. It tends to be a very progressive, productive organization."

Progressive and productive means healthy. All three Virginia cooperatives are involved in milk marketing and processing, and, according to economist Howard McDowell, the state is not a deficit production area as some believe. Instead, large urban markets such as Baltimore, Washington D.C. and northern Virginia and the urban corridor from D.C. through Richmond to Norfolk absorb much of Virginia's fluid milk and dairy products. Excess production then flows south into neighboring deficit production states.

McDowell expects this pattern to expand. "If you look at the demographic trends, the southeast has been growing in population at a greater rate than the Northeast and upper Midwest. In fact, it may be that some of these places have incurred negative growth. So if

Block Elected To Deere & Company

MOLINE, Ill. - John R. Block, former U.S. secretary of agriculture, was elected to the board of directors of Deere & Company at its May 28 board meeting.

Block, who has farmed near Gilson, Ill., since 1960, served as secretary of agriculture from 1981 until February of this year, when he became president of the National American Wholesale Grocers' Association, a trade group representing wholesale grocers and food service distributors.

Block has been a strong ad-

Block, 51, was born in Gilson (near Galesburg) and earned a bachelor of science degree at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1957. He served as an infantry officer in the U.S. Army until 1960, when he returned to the family farm.

He is married to the former Sue Rathje; the Blocks have three children.



From production to marketing to research, the Virginia dairy industry works together, points out John Miller, executive secretary-treasurer of the Virginia Dairymen's Association.

these people are drinking a little milk and eating a little cheese, we're closer to them.

"Transportation is still a factor even though you're talking about manufactured products," he continues. "And I think that's a real plus for the industry in Virginia where we have pretty good production conditions. All other things equal, with the population moving into the Southeast and lower Mid-Atlantic region, you'd rather be a dairy producer in Virginia than Wisconsin. As far as Pennsylvania's concerned, there's a lot of milk there and of course it can flow south too."

Geographic location is a definite advantage, John White agrees, but it's no guarantee. "If you're an unprogressive stick-in-the-mud producer in this state in the dairy industry, you're going to be left in the dust pretty soon," he claims, and Dairymen's Association figures support his statement. In

the last five years, Virginia has lost 50 to 60 herds of dairy animals per year while cattle numbers have remained much more stable and milk production has actually increased.

Economist Howard McDowell explains why. "These are individuals who are not in debt, who have good management and production capability and are in position to retain earnings at a high enough rate to be equal to increased productivity competitively. It's even more than not being in debt; they've got to be good enough to keep up with the best because prices are falling. So for the good producers, the very efficient, there's a future. And they see that."

In response to these pressures, Virginia producers are getting larger and average herd size in the state is nearing 100 head, with rolling herd averages on the increase also. Most dairy farms in the state are family operations

which, even though incorporated, are still a family unit. They are all becoming more efficient as the price of milk has dropped \$1.20 to \$1.50 in the last two years.

"Our dairymen who are going to stay in business have had to do so with less income from milk, with less profit potential with the milk that's being sold," John Miller notes. "So there's had to be a lot of evaluating where they can cut cost and become more efficient."

The same holds true for all aspects of the industry, V.P.I.'s John White explains. Efficiency is the key. "A lot of people waste a lot of energy fussing with each other. In this state we don't waste that much energy fussing. Instead we use the energy to do a better job...and the producers see this. It's a contagious kind of thing, really, and I think that's the reason you have statewide cooperation in Virginia's dairy industry," he concludes. "Success leads to all kinds of cooperation."

Julie Gochenour, Virginia Correspondent

It's not surprising that Julie Gochenour needs a calendar to keep track of her schedule.

In any given week the 30-year-old ag writer from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley may be found at 4-H and FFA shows, questioning dairymen for tips on controlling mastitis, interviewing a farmer on his all-grass program for beef cattle or keeping up-to-date with developments in the rapidly expanding sheep industry. In addition to these duties, she has also joined the staff of Lancaster Farming as the newspaper's Virginia correspondent.

"You need three things to be a good farm writer," the Shenandoah County native explains. "A respect and understanding of agriculture, a good idea of what farmers want to read about... and a pair of boots. The last are especially useful on farm visits in January, February and March," she laughs. "I've never been to a place yet where there wasn't mud or manure or both!"

Gochenour grew up in the Fort Valley, a small rural community tucked inside the Massanutten Mountain which sits between the North and South Forks of the Shenandoah River. The family farm, like

most in the area, was a diversified operation with everything from apple trees, small grain, corn and chickens to cattle and hogs. She was a member of the Fort Valley 4-H and grew up "not knowing how lucky I was to live on a farm. It was just something I took for granted."

Until she went away to college.

After graduation from Longwood College in (appropriately enough) Farmville, Va., she headed home. "I couldn't wait to get back to the valley," Julie confesses. "It was the only place I wanted to be."

Soon after that, she met Gary Gochenour, whose ties to the valley were as strong as her own, and later married him. The couple moved 18 miles across the mountain to his home in Maurertown, just west of Woodstock.

Today she is a full-time agricultural reporter covering the Shenandoah Valley from Winchester to Staunton, one of Virginia's strongest farming regions. It also requires her to be familiar with the entire range of farming activities from dairying and beef cattle to confinement poultry operations - and everything in between.

"And I'm still learning,"



Julie Gochenour

she's quick to add. "Every time you listen to a farmer, you learn something new. If you want a good, workable solution to a problem, ask a farmer. Lots of times they're smarter than the experts."

Besides criss-crossing the valley to keep up with farm news, Julie also regularly helps her father-in-law, Carroll Gochenour, on his 300-plus acre beef and hay operation. She has done advertising and public relations work for both farm products and non-profit organizations and occasionally contributes a column on farming to the local newspaper.