

# Md. Dairy Task Force Airs Recommendations

(Continued from Page A1)

Force, a group created late last year by an act of the Maryland Legislature.

It is not the first such task force to be created in Maryland to search for answers to why the state's dairy farms, processors and producers are disappearing.

According to Myron Wilhide, a Maryland dairy farmer who represented the Maryland Farm Bureau on the Task Force, the 1996 Task Force has been the third created by the state Legislature since 1993 to address the Maryland dairy problem. He has served on all three.

He also said some of the findings of the 1993 Dairy Task Force have been repeated in the following two, including the preliminary 1996 Dairy Task Force findings discussed Monday.

The final recommendations of the Task Force are to be reported to the Maryland Legislature and to Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening later this year.

Maryland Secretary of Agriculture Lewis Riely, co-chairs the Task Force with Dr. Dennis Westhoff, chair of the University of Maryland Department of Animal Sciences.

According to the background provided by the Task Force, Maryland has lost a significant amount of its dairy farmers, as have most other states which have historically had significant numbers of dairy producers.

But, while many states have lost

farms, milk production within those states generally has not been on the decline, until more recently.

More recently, the national picture of dairy production has shifted to traditionally non-dairy areas of the United States, which have become sites for mega-dairies producing nationally significant amounts of milk and meat. These areas include New Mexico, Texas, and regions of California (according to some sources, California has continued to grow larger because of cheap labor and water laws that benefit such growth).

Also, the ability of fewer farms to produce more has led to a decrease in the total number of farms, and dairy cows, while the supply of milk has either increased or stayed constant.

However, Maryland has not only been losing its farms, but also its dairy production.

According to the draft recommendations, the assumption by the Task Force for the loss of the dairy industry in Maryland is that there are several factors weighing heavily against dairy production and processing, and they all seem to come down to a lack of protection and adequate support of the dairy industry, and in a larger sense, the Maryland agricultural community and its land base.

### Create An Expert Team

The first recommendation was that a "Dairy Business and Management Team" be formed to

teach business and management strategies which are profitable and sustainable to dairy producers in an urban environment."

The University of Maryland through its extension program and agents has created and offered dairy farm management courses, based on Cornell University's program, PRO-DAIRY. Maryland expanded it to PRO-FARM to provide business tools to all farmers. (Penn State University similarly offers Dairy MAP, which stands for dairy management and profitability).

The subcommittee of the Task Force that worked on the issue stated, in general, in its draft recommendations that, in attempting to provide meaningful technical and informational assistance to farmers for decision-making, the weak link is in putting responsibility of the entire delivery system upon the individual county agents.

It recognized that county extension agents (especially today with fewer areas able to afford specialists) are required to serve a variety of interests. Most livestock agents must serve those who produce beef, swine, sheep and dairy and in many cases other species equally. Most livestock agents can't afford, much less be allowed by the extension mission, to dedicate their time specifically to dairy operations.

Further, the subcommittee noted that funds for transportation for county agents are restrictive, and don't permit the type of traveling needed for proper outreach.

The proposed recommendation is that the program needs to be changed and become more direct in providing face-to-face, expert-to-farmer contact.

Therefore, it is proposed that the system be operated through the oversight and support of one central team and several regional teams.

In other words, a dedicated team of experts would, more-or-less, be on call to serve dairy farmers in specific regions.

The proposal is that the current University of Maryland campus and field faculty with expertise in dairy extension, dairy farm management, agricultural engineering, and agronomy would be included on the team.

Also, four extension "associates" would be hired to support the team. These associates would have formal training in farm business management, ruminant nutrition, forage crops and agricultural engineering.

Additionally, funds would have to be secured (most likely from the state general fund) to provide county agents with the ability to travel outside of their immediate county to help with the development and presentation of educational programs.

The proposal also would have the overall team develop two specific educational forums — one providing a more general group setting, applicable to all dairy farmers; and a local advisory group that would assist specific dairy managers in their operations.

A four-year plan is proposed for implementing and delivering the program.

For the first three years, each advisory team would have a goal of recruiting 50 dairy producers per year to participate, and then achieve a maintained level of 150 herds (assuming a producer equals a herd) in the program by the fourth year.

In order for producers to participate in receiving the direct assistance of the team, the dairy producers would be required to attend a leadership and management seminar developed by the overall Dairy Business and Management Team.

The one-time cost to the producer would be \$500 to attend the seminar in addition to agreeing to share financial and production records with the team (confidentially, of course).

### Establish Minimum Milk Prices

In February this year, a seven-member Task Force subcommittee was formed and given the task of reviewing claims of predatory pricing of milk in Maryland by Virginia and Pennsylvania processors and suppliers.

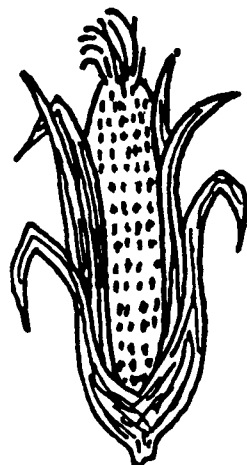
That committee came up with a draft recommendation that was discussed Monday: Maryland should adopt a milk marketing agency similar to those established in Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Among other options, the subcommittee considered taking the two states to task in federal court, specifically by challenging Pennsylvania and Virginia's minimum milk price laws.

However, according to the Task Force subcommittee, that tactic is viewed as fruitless, based on advice from the Maryland Attorney General, who advised that the Pennsylvania program was upheld by the Supreme Court.

Another option considered was establishing laws within Maryland making it illegal for Pennsylvania and Virginia milk dealers to sell their milk in Maryland for less than what their home states allow the

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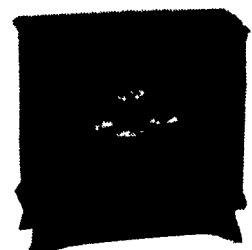
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