

Penn State Extension Develops Agent Teams To Provide Service

SANDY BRADLEY

Mercer Co. Correspondent

GROVE CITY (Mercer Co.) -

As milk production gets more scientific, it is difficult, most agree, for producers to remain up to date on all aspects of dairy technology

And much like farmers need knowledge of animal health, economics, and agronomy, so must those who advise them - the extension agents who provide help and information on a variety of topics

"As the information that we distribute becomes more and more technical," explains Erie County agent George Wilcox, "it needs to be more and more tailored to the specific farm

"These broad-blanket, one-size-fits-all recommendations that were done in the past just don't fit anymore. They have to be tailored to each individual farm "

For this reason, he says, a few cooperative extension offices around the United States have begun to change the way they function - sharing more specialized staffs to cover wider

geographic areas.

One such project, a collaboration between the Mercer, Crawford, and Erie offices, employs a team of specialists, rather than the generalists of times past, to collectively serve the three-county region

The Dairy Extension Team, as they informally call themselves, is made up of George Wilcox, specializing in dairy production, John Tyson, an ag engineer with experience farmstead layout and planning; Dave Dowler, a farm management agent; Joel Hunter, an agronomist, and Dave Baver, a veterinarian whose focus is nutrition and animal health.

Although all team members do not occupy the same office, they are housed in their respective "home" county locations, and farmers are put in touch with agents on a case-by-case basis, depending on which has the skills most compatible with a particular problem or question.

Although the team implementation is new to Pennsylvania, formed to work in a multi-county capacity, members

say there are several states with similar structures.

One New York group has been implementing the concept for 10 or 12 years, Crawford-based Dave Dowler points out, with a Michigan group forming five or six years ago.

The local unit was officially completed last fall with the hiring of Dave Baver, he says, but assembling the group has been an ongoing project, in the works for about 10 years - with input from administrators as well as agents who work in the field.

"It's a group project," agrees Wilcox "We've looked at that possibility and how we could better serve the dairy industry for several years, and decided that expertise was needed in agronomy, ag engineering, dairy production, and farm management.

"With the advent of a vacancy in Mercer County, we decided

that what we were lacking the most was an in-depth expertise in animal health and the biosecurity industry. That's when Dave Baver was added to the group.

"We've been talking about it for a number of years, and as vacancies occurred, we hired the help we thought we've needed. This is the first time we've been 100 percent staffed This last year we've really been visible as a team."

One reason for this - and probably the reason that more offices haven't begun to assemble such groups, the agents say - is that, in order to meet all of the job requirements in their geographic areas, dairy agents have always needed broad skill sets.

To replace these generalists with specialists means doing so over a period of years -- as job vacancies occur.

Despite the fact that the dairy extension team has achieved this

change in an official capacity, its members are quick to point out that, in order to effectively serve producers, many Pennsylvania agents have always worked cooperatively across county lines - sharing their time and expertise with neighboring agents and farmers as needed.

The Erie, Crawford, and Mercer team is simply the first to be formalized - with each member hand-picked for his specific focus and what it adds to the group as a whole.

By hiring specialists, says Wilcox, the group can offer more to farmers:

"The first benefit," he says, "is we've got individuals out here responsible for keeping track of the latest development in a given area or field - on the cutting edge as far as new technology or methods. Second is the access part of it: We've got access to the

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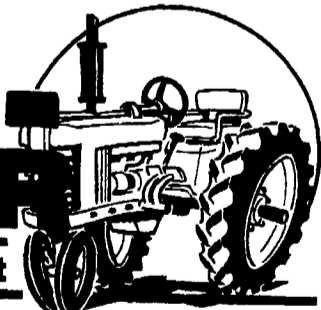
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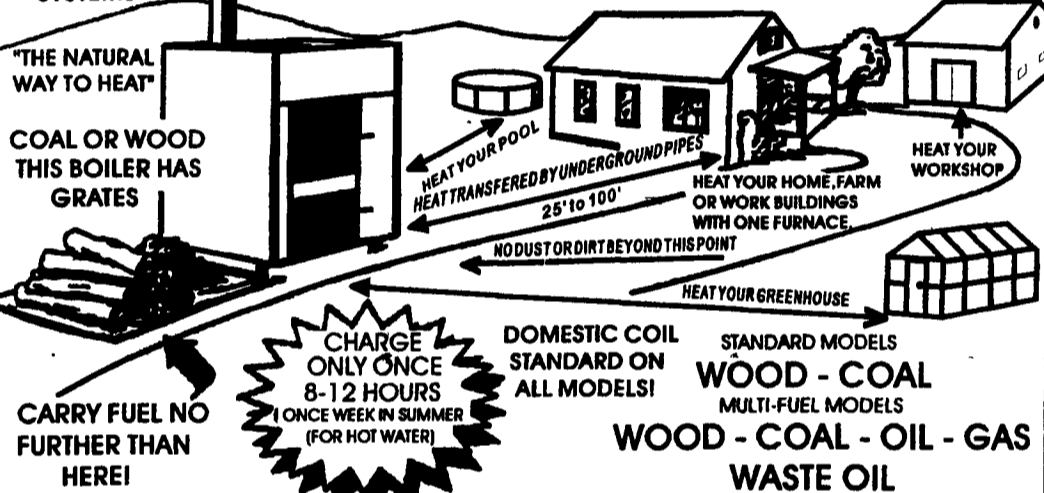
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