

Students Learn About Agriculture While Assisting With Campaign To Reward Dairy Farming Stewardship

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(Centre Co.)—Rewarding environmental stewardship of dairy farmers is almost as difficult as increasing ag awareness of consumers.

A project led by Ann Major, assistant professor of communications at Penn State, does both.

Students in Major's Communications 473 have been working with the Rodale Institute's Dairy Network Partnership (DNP) to research and develop ways to educate consumers about environmental problems in the Chesapeake Bay area.

"The project started in June 1998," said Major. "My area of research is in environmental public opinion, and I worked with Chris Novak from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection on a project in 1997. When Les Lanyon, professor of agronomy at Penn State, read about the project, he contacted me to work on the 'Chesapeake Milk' project."

To prepare students to work on the "Chesapeake Milk" project, Major had a student develop an extensive website with materials on agriculture and sustainability during the summer of 1998.

"The kids coming into this class have little understanding about the environment and especially about the dairy industry," said Major. "They have no concept of milk other than the fact that it's available at the grocery store."

As part of the project, classes in both the fall and spring of 1998 and 1999 researched consumer interest and developed media kits to launch "Chesa-

peake Milk," which bears the Environmental Quality Initiative (EQI) label.

In the fall, students in Communications 473, which is a capstone class taken during the senior year, created four projects focusing on "Chesapeake Milk."

The first was to design focus groups to help the DNP test the "Chesapeake Milk" campaign, which returns a portion of the profits from that milk to farmers who are involved in environmental stewardship.

The second group designed environmental education materials to be taken into elementary schools. The materials included a video highlighting dairy farming and nutrient runoff, as well as classroom activities and a field trip to a dairy farm.

Similar materials for adult groups were prepared by a third group of students. The materials target groups such as the Women's League of Voters, PTA groups, and environmental groups.

A fourth group of students developed a media directory for the campaign that listed all environmental and business reporters in eastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and northern Virginia.

In the spring of 1998, the students held the focus groups to research the "Chesapeake Milk" message. Five separate focus groups were held, and key findings were that very few consumers had any idea that there was a problem with nutrient runoff from dairy farms.

"Consumers in the focus groups did not connect dairy farming with environmental issues," said Major. "Once they read the materials on the milk

carton, they said they would be interested in donating a nickel from their milk to reward farmers for environmental stewardship."

After the focus groups were completed and the materials were finished, Major's class delivered the materials to Lori Sandman, who is the project director for the Dairy Network Partnership.

According to Sandman, the students' contribution to the project was invaluable.

"It was fantastic to work with them," said Sandman. "We're a non-profit organization with a small staff, and we couldn't have accomplished all of the necessary work on this project without the help of the students."

Students in Major's spring 1999 class updated the media kit and conducted more focus groups. They also developed an in-store survey, which was refined by students in Major's fall 1999 class.

Leon Weber from Rodale Institute administered the survey and determined whether con-

sumers would be willing to buy "Chesapeake Milk" at a higher price if they knew the extra profits went to environmental stewardship.

Weber also conducted a farmstead survey with farmers who participated in the Environmental Quality Initiative. These farmers had to adhere to environmental guidelines in order to market their milk as "Chesapeake Milk."

"Three-quarters of the farmers surveyed made changes to protect water quality during the previous year," said Weber. "However, most of the changes required small amounts of time and money."

It's clear that the farmers involved in this project are motivated by more than just the prospect of a premium for environmental stewardship," said Weber. "More than a third of the farmers who made improvements already qualified for the Environmental Quality premium before making the improvements."

According to Major, her spring 2000 Communications 473 class has put the "Chesa-

peake Milk" project on hold.

"We haven't gotten any new assignments from the DNP," said Major. "They usually call or email us about the project when they want us to do something."

The test market for "Chesapeake Milk" was for one year through December 1999. Major is not sure whether the milk is still available at grocery stores.

"One thing that is for sure is that my students learned invaluable information about agriculture and the environment," said Major. "In the evaluations, students said how much they learned and how this class will always impact their food purchasing decisions."

It amazes Major that Penn State does not offer one undergraduate course in agriculture that all students in the University are required to take.

"They slip through without knowing anything about agriculture," said Major. "My class had the good fortune in the fall to visit Penn State's dairy center. Many of the students were never near a cow before then."



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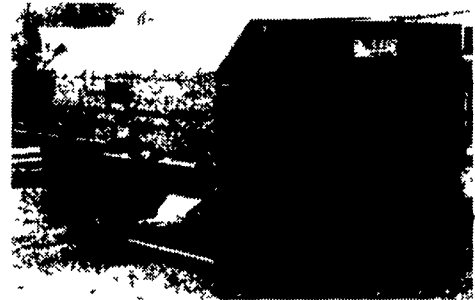
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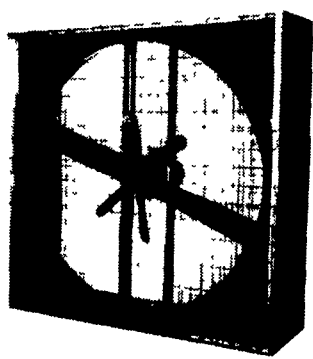
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