

Enhancing Dairy Farming's Image

ROSEMONT, Ill. — Today's consumers seem to be in love with cows. From the "Cows on Parade" statues displayed this summer on the sidewalks of New York to the myriad Holstein-patterned items featured in gift shops everywhere, the image of the dairy cow has become strongly imbedded in American culture.

But do U.S. consumers have the same positive feeling about dairy producers and the farms where those cows reside?

According to recent survey results, the answer appears to be "yes," with the caution that consumers remain largely uninformed about dairy farms. A recent dairy checkoff-sponsored Roper Starch Worldwide survey of 500 consumers nationwide in-

dicates that 74 percent of 500 consumers surveyed said dairy farmers make a significant contribution to society. Only teachers (89 percent) and doctors (88 percent) ranked higher on the list.

The dairy industry's challenge is to make sure this current positive image remains, because the public image of dairy farming can make a long-term difference in the ability of U.S. dairy producers to sell their product, according to Linda Eatherton, vice president of public and industry relations for Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), which manages the national dairy checkoff on behalf of America's dairy farmers.

"Consumers who view dairy producers as good caretakers of

their animals and the environment are likely to have fewer concerns about the wholesomeness of the milk they drink," Eatherton said.

This is one reason why DMI and National Milk Producers Federation have responded to a request by dairy producer leadership to co-sponsor an industry-wide Reputation Management program.

While public opinion overall toward dairy farming remains positive, some attitudes give rise to concern. Contrary to reality, most consumers (51 percent) in the same Roper Starch Worldwide survey expressed belief that the majority of dairy farms are owned not by farmers and their families, but corporations.

"This indicates that while

consumers show a high regard for dairy producers, they remain uninformed about the real world of dairy farming," said Glen Schroeder, a Minnesota dairy producer who is chairman of the joint DMI committee that oversees checkoff communications programs on the image of dairy farming. "As more consumers become even farther removed from dairy farms, misperceptions about dairying are likely to intensify."

The Reputation Management program will help bridge this gap by telling consumers about producers' use of responsible herd health practices, along with the industry's environmental stewardship, high product safety standards and top-quality dairy products, Schroeder added.

To build on the current trust bank dairy producers now have and to help protect against a

possible slippage in public opinion, the Reputation Management program reinforces public confidence that dairy producers are running their businesses in a responsible manner. The program includes educating consumer media about dairy farming and initiating public education campaigns to correct consumer misperceptions about the dairy industry, while spotlighting the industry's best management practices.

"The success of this program lies in the ability of the entire industry to work together to put its best face forward to the public," Schroeder said. "We dairy producers can help ourselves and the entire industry by maintaining high standards on environmental stewardship, animal care and product safety to help us put our farms and our products in the best light for consumers."

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