

# Va. Dairy Conferences Keep Farmers Up To Date

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DAYTON, Va. — At the Montezuma Hall on Dec. 11, a group of dairy farmers that gathered for the 2003 Valley Dairy Conference heard in-depth information from Virginia Tech representatives and guest speaker, Phillip Jardon, from West Central Soy, Ralston, Iowa.

The local conference was third in a series of five being conducted in the state. The four other events scheduled were in Southwest Virginia, Rocky Mount, Farmville, and Culpeper.

The topics presented included the latest studies relating to nutrition and management of dry cows, monitoring anionic salt programs by urine pH, shorter dry periods, mastitis control, selecting sires for daughter pregnancy rate, and manipulation of light (photoperiod) to increase milk in lactating dairy cows.

Also, farm management when milk prices are low, farm efficiency in difficult times, and managing finances well in difficult times were also on the agenda.

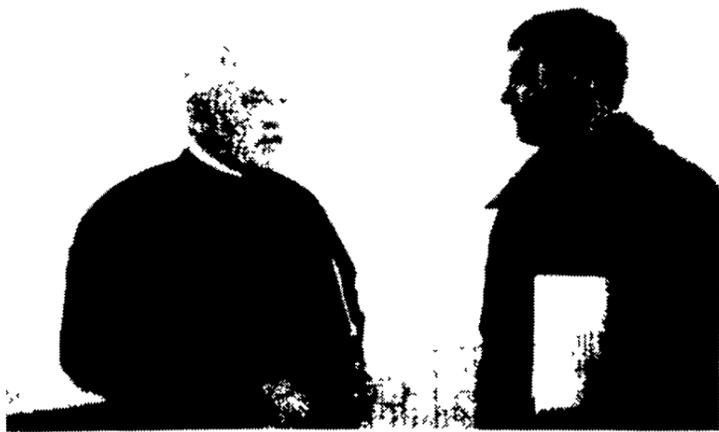
Speakers included Dr. Steve Nickerson, head of the Virginia Tech Department of Dairy Science. When he discussed new developments in mastitis control, everyone was listening.

Nickerson said the association of bulk tank somatic cell count with herd mastitis status and results in financial losses to the tune of \$180 per cow every year.

At that rate, a small herd of 50 head will generate an annual loss well above \$9,000. When the herd is comprised of 400 cows, the losses climb to \$72,408.

"It's a very expensive disease," Nickerson said. "We need to do all we can to decrease the somatic cell count."

In addressing the problem, dry cow therapy has a number of ad-



Following the 2003 Valley Dairy Conference Jerry Swisher, left, from Fairfield, and Dennis Showalter, a dairy farmer from Montezuma, discuss relevant topics. Photo by Gay Brownlee, Virginia correspondent.

vantages. It reduces the IMI during early dry-off, reduces infection at calving, cure rate is higher than lactation, tissue may redevelop before calving, clinical mastitis at calving is reduced, and antibiotic contamination is minimal.

While exterior teat sealants for deterring bacteria may look good on the surface, Nickerson said they don't really work. Those who are using the teatseal product OrbeSeal in conjunction with dry cow therapy, however, are definitely on the side of prevention, he said.

"I always say treat with a dry cow product and follow with OrbeSeal," Nickerson said, assuring those present that the product is officially approved for organic use.

"Basically, we are looking at prevention during the dry period," Nickerson said.

He also said that with heifer mastitis, flies are definitely involved.

"Heifers are our future cows.

We've got to take care of them."

Phillip W. Jardon spent considerable time discussing the nutrition and management of dry cows — the rumen, immune system, normal calcium levels, and positive energy balance.

He also discussed the high (bad), low (good), and variable DCAD (dietary cation-anion difference), in feeds.

Jardon said that sometimes farmers over-fertilize fields.

"In general, we put too much emphasis on alfalfa," Jardon said. "Cows like grass and I like grass in a close-up diet. It has a good scratch factor."

"Even experts disagree," he said, about the controversy over fiber content in the diet of a close-up cow. "We don't have it figured out, although we think we do."

Jardon also referred to a recent article, "Shorter Dry Periods Look Good," written by Robin Rastani and Ric Grummer, in *Hoard's Dairyman* (December 2003) and copied with permission.

During a break in the conference, dairyman Dale

Heatwole from Dayton said that he was interested primarily in learning about close-up and dry cow management for his mixed herd of 60 Holstein and Brown Swiss cows.

"I would like to try some OrbeSeal in the teats of a dry cow, and shorten the dry period — I'll be doing more of that," he said.

"I'm going to try dry-treating heifers before they freshen," Heatwole said.

Bennet Cassell, extension dairy scientist in genetics and management, covered the gamut of information relating to sire selection in regard to daughter pregnancy rate (PR).

This covered fertility, genetics, breeding values, and selection programs to reduce the costs of production.

Manipulation of photoperiod to increase milk yield in lactating cows was a topic Iris D. Peeler discussed. Peeler is a masters degree student in the Vermont Department of Dairy Science.

She referred to a number of sources supporting her presentation and concluded that by simply manipulating light (a long day of 16 hours light and eight hours dark, for example) is a simple and cost-effective way for dairies of all sizes to increase milk yield in lactating dairy cattle.

The light technology that is selected should be as close as possible to natural light.

Aaron Musick addressed the issue of how to manage the dairy farm when milk prices are low. Musick is the herd manager at the Tifton Research Station, University of Georgia.

He defined a good manager and talked about short and long-term planning, noting the specific issues that are entailed in sound management practices.

The dairy business person must have intimate knowledge of his/her operation, past and pres-

ent, before he/she can plan its future. Facilities, dairy animals, equipment, employee relations, and financial accounts (business and personal) are all part of the picture.

Maintaining a records system accurately is essential to a successful operation.

Professor Ronald E. Pearson, the Vermont Department of Dairy Science, in his presentation on managing dairy operations in difficult times, said "The extreme fluctuations in milk price accentuate the need to use times of higher price to pay down debt, improve efficiency, and stockpile cash to survive the next downturn."

When problems arise they first have to be identified and the cause of them diagnosed. Alternative solutions must be examined, followed by the decision about how to solve the problem. Form a tactical plan about who does what, when, where. Last, follow up to determine if progress has been made.

"You have to go back and check if the problems are solved," Pearson said.

The financial aspect of management was covered by Gordon Groover, the Vermont extension economist.

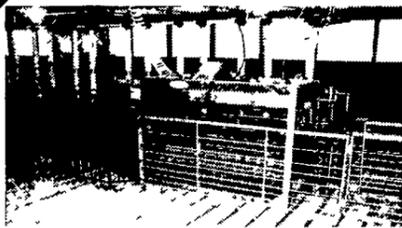
"Critical decisions are made when times are good. When times are good, that's when you set the stage for what's going to come back and haunt you," Groover said.

Groover said farmers need to understand why they farm and they need to learn how to focus on the opportunities rather than the problems.

The conference was hosted by Alan Grove, extension dairy agent working out of the Rockingham Extension office and Tina Horn, extension dairy agent from the Augusta Extension office.

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