DAIRY HERD MANAGEMENT

Dairy industry works to reduce ‘carbon footprint’ (commentary)

By Thomas Quaife | Friday, September 24, 2010

A few weeks ago, I visited with representatives of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy about greenhouse-gas emissions. The Innovation Center, an industry-wide forum created by Dairy Management Inc., the dairy-checkoff group, is spearheading research that will help the dairy industry reduce its “carbon footprint.”

Frankly, it has taken me a while to fully embrace this concept. I, for one, believe that “global warming” is being driven by people who have a political agenda. I keep trying to determine what that agenda is:

• More government control?

• Financial profit?

• A sincere desire to help the environment? (If so, what’s with the private jets and limousines every time these people get together? The United Nations climate-change summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, last December was a prime example of this lavishness.)

Last February, at the NMC (formerly National Mastitis Council) annual meeting, I heard compelling evidence from Dennis Avery of the Hudson Institute that the earth goes through warming and cooling cycles as part of a natural process. He described it as a solar-driven process rather than one caused by man.

Nevertheless, I am the first to applaud the Innovation Center for the work it is doing on the issue. Regardless of personal beliefs, the main thing is to appear proactive and take global warming seriously, since it is something that many consumers care about.

And, I have been pleasantly surprised to learn that the things a farm does to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions can also make it more efficient and profitable. Read more about that.

Here are some of the things the dairy industry can do to be proactive and drive the process rather than allowing government to step in and demand changes:

• Increased adoption of manure digesters. (Someone will need to get the utility companies to offer more financial incentives.)

• Conservation tillage.

• Efficient use of fertilizer, particularly nitrogen fertilizer.

• Improved efficiencies in processing, packaging and transportation.

Already, we are learning that the dairy “carbon footprint” is much lower than previously estimated. The United Nations threw out a red herring in 2006 with its report, “Livestock’s Long Shadow.” The report claimed that the world’s livestock sector was responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse-gas emissions — higher than the transportation sector. Since then, the report has been thoroughly debunked. For one thing, it was based on world-wide numbers and did not account for more efficient countries, like the United States. In the U.S., the dairy industry is responsible for only about 2 percent of total greenhouse-gas emissions.

Recent work at the University of Arkansas’ Applied Sustainability Center shows that the dairy industry generates 17.6 pounds of carbon-dioxide equivalent for every gallon of milk produced and sold through the marketing chain to the consumer. That number will improve with further improvements in efficiency.

Bottom-line: The dairy industry has been a leader in reducing its carbon footprint over the past 70 years and will continue to do so by adopting more efficient techniques. It is a win-win situation for farms and the general public alike.