

Carbon footprint study a good step for dairy industry

TCT comment



By Jim Massey

A new study shows that the dairy industry's carbon footprint is considerably smaller than what some originally believed.

Apparently cow flatulence isn't such a big deal after all.

It was all a lot of hot air.

Last month dairy industry officials released the findings of a national fluid milk carbon footprint study. It indicated that the dairy industry's carbon footprint is significantly smaller than some people originally believed.

According to the study, total dairy greenhouse gas emissions are about 2 percent of total U.S. emissions. The farm component of that is about 1.5 percent.

Two percent is considerably less than the Food and Agriculture Organization's 18 percent emissions estimate for global livestock.

About two years ago, there were even rumors that U.S. farmers might be taxed for their animals' gas emissions. In the summer of 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency asked for public comments on the idea of regulating greenhouse gas emissions from cars, and "stationary sources" such as cows and other livestock. The suggested fee at the time was as high as \$175 per cow.

The EPA eventually disputed that

it was ever seriously considering such a tax.

The latest news doesn't mean dairy industry officials should be content with the findings. They say they are going to promote management practices and technologies that boost productivity while cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Kimberly Clauss, a California dairy farmer and immediate past chairwoman of the National Dairy Board, said the study offers a baseline of where the dairy industry is in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, but also offers challenges for improvement.

Clauss, who was at the World Dairy Expo last week, said dairy farmers can do things as simple as having a free energy audit to determine where they might save energy and money.

Dairy industry officials say producers and others within the industry could implement improved feed-efficiency practices, or work on such issues as manure management, energy management, improved packaging formats, processing technolo-

gies and fuel efficiency.

Clauss said the study was a good way to determine the dairy industry's greenhouse gas contributions and be proactive on the issue.

"I want to be sitting at the table when the regulations are developed," Clauss said. "We need to tell consumers how sustainable the industry has been."

The Illinois-based Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy commissioned the University of Arkansas Applied Sustainability Center to conduct the study. Researchers followed a gallon of milk from the beginning of the life cycle when crops are grown to feed cows until the consumer disposes of the carton. Stages in between included milk production, delivery to the processor, processing, packaging, distribution and retail.

Dairy leaders say they aren't just looking at dairy farms as they search for ways to reduce the industry's emissions. They also are looking at how dairy plants, transportation companies and others involved in the food chain can be more earth-friendly.

While industry officials are looking for ways to make dairy's carbon footprint smaller, it has already been significantly reduced, another study shows. Cornell University officials say milk's carbon footprint decreased by 63 percent from 1944 to 2007 as a result of production efficiencies, nutrition management and other on-farm improvements.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy signed a memorandum of understanding in December to reduce the industry's greenhouse gas emissions. The carbon footprint study and the memorandum were good first steps in determining the extent of the problem and pledging to deal with it.

The dairy industry should be commended for taking a proactive approach to the greenhouse gas emission issue. The science-based study provides the kind of information that should be valuable in the future.

The next time someone gets a hare-brained idea such as a livestock flatulence tax, the industry should be ready to fire back with facts. That's always a good defense.