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Livestock

Online tool helps dairymen evaluate energy efficiency

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MADISON, Wis. — Dairymen have a new online resource to help them reduce energy use on their farms.

The SaveEnergy tool recently was launched by the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy at www.usdairy.com/saveenergy.

"This is a one-stop resource for dairy producers to look at their input costs," said Robert Madeja, sustainability business analyst for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy. "We designed the website to be as simple as possible."

On the website, the first step dairymen learn is how to cut costs on farm energy use. Next, they can decide if an energy audit is right for their operation.

"The website has a short quiz that will determine if an energy audit will be a benefit for your farm," Madeja said, explaining the quiz asks questions about circulation fans, types of lighting fixtures and large motors, for example.

The third step is to find funding for energy audits and equipment.

"There is a state-by-state listing of federal, state or utility programs that are available to help fund these costs," the analyst noted.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service funded part of the development of the SaveEnergy tool.

"We provided assistance to reach out to more producers," said Rebecca MacLeod, national energy efficiency liaison for the NRCS.

"We are excited about the website because it will help us make connections with people we have not been able to reach, like dairy co-ops."

The SaveEnergy website provides sample audits.

"For an on-farm energy audit, a data collector will come to your farm and look at things like your motors, lighting fixtures, ventilation and age of equipment," MacLeod explained.

"It takes from three to four hours, and then you will receive recommendations on energy savings, the cost to do the upgrades and the payback time.

"Almost always, changing the lighting will give you the quickest return on your investment," the NRCS liaison said.

One example on the website for a 110-cow dairy shows how changing the farm's lighting can save money for a dairyman. By changing the lights in the calf barn, yard, free stall, parlor and holding area, the estimated annual electricity savings were 12,038 kilowatts. The estimated annual energy savings totaled $1,685, and the estimated payback was four years.

"By having an audit, you can plan for the future because it would be difficult to implement all the changes at one time," MacLeod said.

"But when you are doing regular maintenance, you could upgrade the lights and save in the long run."

The cost for an energy audit usually is based on animal units.

"For smaller operations, the cost will be from $1,200 to $1,300, and for larger operations it will be around $3,000," MacLeod said.

"Although it varies by state, some utility companies will cover almost all of the costs of an audit."

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In Illinois and Indiana, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program can provide financial assistance toward developing an Agricultural Energy Management Plan and the Rural Energy for America Program provides grants and loans to producers to purchase and install renewable energy systems and make energy efficiency improvements.

"In addition to the cost of the audit, dairymen can also apply for funds to help offset the cost of implementing the recommendations," MacLeod noted.

"The energy plans are for the benefit of the farm to see the cost optimization and to plan for the future," Madeja said.

"It leads to farm profitability, and we also need to tell the story to the community," MacLeod said.

"Becoming more energy efficient is good for everyone, it's good for business and it's good for the environment."

The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy was created in 2008 and is funded by Dairy Management Inc. The goal is to increase demand for dairy products across the country through innovation.

The center is focused on five initiatives — health and wellness, research and insights, sustainability, consumer confidence and globalization.