Dairy Farmers Urged to Get Energy Audit

August 20, 2011
By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant New York Correspondent

SENECA FALLS, N.Y. — How energy efficient is your dairy? The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy offered information on the topic for attendees of Empire Farm Days, held last week in Seneca Falls, N.Y.

“It’s about helping farmers understand the benefit of a farm energy audit and hook up with the resources that can help pay for that,” said Agnes Schaefer-Kreiser, spokeswoman for the center.

As part of the organization’s commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the center has partnered with USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service to encourage dairymen to reduce their farm’s greenhouse gas emissions in the production of fluid milk by 25 percent by 2020. This includes all aspects of the industry: growing crops for the herd, producing milk, delivery to the processor, processing, packaging, distributing, retail, consumption and disposal.

An Oct. 2010 study by the University of Arkansas and Michigan Technological University looked at the carbon footprint for skim, 1-percent, 2-percent and whole milk. The aggregated total, based primarily on 2007 to 2008 data, indicated a carbon footprint of 17.6 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalents per every gallon of milk consumed in the U.S., or approximately 2 percent of total U.S. emissions.

The center would like to see this number decrease, but not only for the sake of the environment. Improving energy efficiency can help a farm’s bottom line, too.

“It’s a low-hanging fruit’ type of project,” said Robert Madeja, a dairy industry analyst for the center. “As far as investment of money and time, it’s a lot lower investment for the farmer. There could be some significant cost savings depending upon the cost of equipment.”

Although some operators may want to replace inefficient electrical equipment with modern models that are energy efficient, some energy efficiency changes are free.

“Cleaning fans and turning off lights can pay off with energy efficiency and herd health,” Madeja said.

Although the organization’s awareness campaign officially rolls out this fall, Empire Farm Days attendees received a sneak peak.

Manning the booth were Madeja, Rebecca Macleod of the Natural Resources and Conservation Service, and Beth Meyer from American Dairy Association and Dairy Council in New York. The trio updated attendees on how energy efficiency impacts the dairy industry.

“We like to say that it’s a manageable, controllable cost,” Madeja said. “An energy audit is what we like to start with. It’s an opportunity to look at how you’re using energy and where (you can) cut back on costs.”

Typically, an energy auditor will conduct a phone interview, tour the site, take a few photos and report his findings to the farmer.

“The farmer can use it as a tool to really be sure they’re operating as efficiently as possible,” Madeja said. “They can check back and have another audit in a few years. Every five years is recommended.”

Most firms that provide energy audits charge around $1,300; however, the savings realized after implementation can run between 10 and 35 percent of the farm’s power bill.

“A lot of farmers are surprised by the savings by the equipment out there,” Madeja said. “(An audit) is a great way to keep up on what’s most efficient.”

For farmers who need to replace old equipment, purchasing energy efficient models makes perfect sense. In some cases, the energy savings can pay for the equipment.

“The payback is over five years on the equipment generally,” Madeja said. “In New York state, there are some great programs that support farmers doing this.”

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy run the Agricultural Energy Management plan which can pay for up to 75 percent of an energy audit. Farmers can apply at their local NRCS office, which will review the application and, if approved, help farmers find vendors to perform the audit.