



Grant to Support Dairy Farm Stewardship Toolkit

By News Editor

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Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has announced a \$1.1 million Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) to the Dairy Research Institute™ (formerly known as Dairy Science Institute, Inc.), an affiliate of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy®.

The funding will support the development of a Dairy Farm Stewardship Toolkit for dairy producers to evaluate their production techniques and identify potential improvements in management practices. These improvements could increase profitability or reduce costs on the farm.

“This grant will help take the industry’s heritage of dairy stewardship to a new business level,” said Bob Foster, owner, Foster Brothers Farm in Middlebury, Vt. “As dairy producers, we know that consumers want products that are not only nutritious and good-tasting, but also environmentally friendly. We have long been committed to stewardship, but have not had a science-based tool to identify and measure practices that reduce costs and environmental impact.”

The grant, awarded through a nationwide competitive process, is made available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The first stage in developing the toolkit will be to establish a set of on-farm sustainability indicators that will be pilot-tested on farms. A broad group of stakeholders from the dairy industry and other experts will determine which indicators best describe the quality and quantity of economic, social and environmental value provided by farms. Indicators could include, for example: a farm’s contribution to the local community through jobs and community relations; energy efficiency; food safety and quality; water quality and use; waste management; and greenhouse gas emissions.

The toolkit will be national in scope. At least 12 dairy producers within 10 regions across the country will participate in pilot tests. The 120 producer volunteers will represent a diverse set of farms, including small- and large-scale dairies, dairies with varying milk production methods,

and both conventional and organic dairies. On-farm pilot tests in the designated areas will begin in October.

When completed, the toolkit will enable producers to generate an analysis of their stewardship practices and help them communicate positive contributions their farm businesses have made to neighbors, community groups, consumers and customers.

The U.S. dairy industry is developing best practices and decision-support tools for producers, processors, manufacturers, transport and retail through a voluntary, industrywide effort to measure and improve dairy sustainability. The toolkit is an important first component of the Farm Smart project, which is creating a series of on-field decision-support tools for dairy and crop production management.

“This toolkit will give producers a resource that will help them tell their stewardship story in a way that will be easily understood and valued,” said Barbara O’Brien, president of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy and senior executive vice president of Dairy Management Inc.[™], which manages the dairy checkoff on behalf of the nation’s farmers. “By establishing benchmarks and assessing specific on-farm practices, producers will be able to better understand the efficiency of their overall operations, as well as opportunities for improvement. And that is not only good for business, but also good for the environment, for consumers and for communities.”