

Is dairy production good for society?

IF YOU ASK 10 DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO define what “sustainability” means, you will get 10 different answers. In my own mind, it has an element of environmental stewardship built in, but there’s more. Sustainability really means accomplishing a greater good for society.

No one would deny that dairy producers play a valuable role in producing a safe, wholesome food product. Any questions have to do with dairy’s impact on the environment. Does the food produced (and economic benefit generated) outweigh the water resources used for cattle and crops, methane emissions from cows, and so on?

Over the past 60 years, dairy farms have made significant progress in reducing their “carbon footprint,” mainly because production has gotten so efficient that fewer cows are needed. But there’s still room for improvement.

Last month, I had the opportunity to visit with Allen Dusault, project director for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, about energy audits that have been conducted on hundreds of dairy farms by independent experts.

Invariably, the farms find ways to save energy.

“Most dairies have an opportunity to implement energy-efficient equipment and practices that can save anywhere between 10 and 35 percent on their annual energy use,” Dusault said.

Besides saving energy, why is this so important?

On June 14, I attended a Future of Food Summit in Washington, D.C., sponsored by *The Washington Post*, Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy and Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Much of the discussion had to do with feeding a hungry world — a daunting challenge, given the fact the global population will grow from 7 to 9 billion over the next 40 years. References to “sustainability” were mixed into the discussion. And against this backdrop, the National Dairy Council announced that it would form a partnership with Feeding America, a domestic hunger-relief organization.

There were 17 speakers that day, and I sat there wondering how to tie it all together. What’s the over-arching theme?

Finally, it occurred to me that what the dairy industry is really doing here — why it partnered with *The Washington Post* and others — is to show its commitment to society. It’s not enough to produce a safe, wholesome food product. It’s also necessary to show that dairy farmers are accomplishing larger societal goals, such as nutrition education, hunger relief, economic stimulus, and conservation of existing resources.

We take many of these things for granted. But it’s necessary to rub shoulders with other stakeholders so they see this commitment, as well... *The Washington Posts* of the world, the Wal-Marts of the world, and the Feeding Americas of the world.

The next time you go to the milking barn or parlor, don’t just think about the task at hand. Think about what you are doing to help society.

