DAIRY HERD NETWORK

Commentary: Blaming LA's smog on cows doesn't meet 'smell test'

Tom Quaife, Editor, Dairy Herd Network | Updated: May 11, 2012

I was surprised this week to see that only a few news media outlets picked up on the story, "Ammonia emissions from Calif. dairy herds contribute heavily to smog."

The *Washington Post* was the only noteworthy media outlet to run the story. Nothing was found in the *Los Angeles Times*, which would seem the most likely source since it's smog in LA that's at issue here.

Maybe there is hope after all that the media will be discerning and not run stories that seem just too preposterous.

Dairy Herd Management ran this story, anticipating that it would be more of an issue than it was.

The more I got into the story, the more the research from scientists at the University of Colorado and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration just didn't meet the "smell test."

For one thing, the researchers came to the amazing conclusion that cows contribute at least as much to the smog problem in Los Angeles as automobiles.

As one of our readers pointed out, he'd rather be trapped in a garage with a bunch of cows rather than ONE running car.

Then, there is a matter of the wind. Prevailing winds in the Los Angeles area are from the west and southwest for most of the year. Therefore, with dairies located in the eastern portion of the basin, any contribution that cows make to the city's smog is minimized.

Finally, the numbers just don't add up.

Ying Wang, director of Life Cycle Assessment research for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, said a previous study, involving the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, found that the average ammonia emissions per cow per day are approximately 60.9 grams. When you take 60.9 grams and multiply them by 298,000 cows in the eastern LA basin (as cited by the University of Colorado and NOAA researchers), you get 18.15 million grams per day, which is about 18 metric tons. Yet, the University of Colorado/NOAA study blamed cows for 33 to 176 metric tons per day. Look even further; there aren't that many cows — at least not dairy cows. The Milk Producers Council in Ontario, Calif., says there are about 100,000 mature dairy cows — milking and dry — in the area. The area once had a fairly sizeable dairy cow population, but that is no longer the case. Beef cattle have never been a factor. So, suddenly, if you only have 100,000 cows, you only have one-third of the animals the researchers based their study on. That puts ammonia emissions at 6 metric tons rather than 33 to 176 metric tons.

It's a good thing the media did not pick up on this one.

And, finally, here is a story that appeared in Fishbowl LA this morning acknowledging my column. Wow, LA…. Maybe I'll be famous!