



Commentary: Let's solve the fluid milk crisis

Tom Quaife, Editor, Dairy Herd Network | Updated: November 2, 2012

ORLANDO, Fla. — The first step in solving a problem is admitting there is a problem.

Indeed, after more than 40 years of declining fluid milk sales, dairy promotion officials are talking candidly about the problem and what needs to be done.

"As you are painfully aware, fluid milk is in crisis," Barbara O'Brien, president of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, told those attending the joint annual meeting of the National Milk Producers Federation and Dairy Management Inc. this week in Orlando, Fla.

"Can fluid milk be saved?" she asked somewhat rhetorically. "We know the answer is 'yes.'"

There is no "silver bullet." Instead, there are various pathways to explore.

One pathway is to engage leaders from across the industry in constructive dialogue. Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), which manages the national dairy checkoff program, calls this the "trustee" approach. A trustee is someone who has an interest — indeed an obligation — to promote the best interests of the industry, which means listening to ideas and trying new things.

Another pathway is better packaging. Not that there's anything wrong with the gallon jugs; they have been fixtures in American homes for years. But lifestyles have changed. Many Americans now consume a majority of their food and beverages away from home. Under those circumstances, single-serve milk containers make more sense.

Finding single-serve containers can be difficult at times. I know this week, as I was heading to the airport in Orlando, I stopped at a convenience store to buy some chocolate milk and there was only one kind — the extra rich, whole milk variety that I ended up buying, but wanted a better choice.

Something has to be done.

A couple of weeks ago, I learned of a research study — the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — which showed that 43 percent of teenagers (aged 13 through 17) do not drink milk. Not only are these kids being deprived of an important nutritional source, they are taking on consumption patterns that will follow them into adulthood. That does not bode well for the future of milk consumption unless something changes.

A good starting point would be to provide the kids with choices — cold milk in accessible places in convenient packaging in a variety of flavors.

"We have to make sure milk is convenient to use whenever (people) want it," Jim Wegner, president and CEO of Darigold Cooperative, said at this week's meeting in Orlando.

I couldn't agree more.

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