



Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research goes state of the art

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John Lucey, director of the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research at UW-Madison, looks over equipment in the Babcock Hall Dairy Plant that is more than 50 years old. Modernizing the plant is one of the key parts of the \$32 million expansion for the Center for Dairy Research.

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WISCONSIN CENTER FOR DAIRY RESEARCH

Location: UW-Madison, Babcock Hall

Address: 1605 Linden Drive

Web: www.cdr.wisc.edu

Major donors for building campaign:
go.madison.com/CDRfund

A foreign dignitary mentioned recently how impressed he was with the scientists and students at the renowned Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research when he met with its director at UW-Madison's Babcock Hall.

But then he shook his head as he asked why researchers had to work in a cramped facility with outdated equipment, some of which was installed more than 50 years ago.

"He looked at me and said, 'You have top-class people and a Third World facility,'" said John Lucey, director of the Center for Dairy Research (CDR). "It was hard-hitting, but I couldn't argue it."

The center's facilities may soon match the reputation of its researchers. There are plans to rebuild the Babcock Hall Dairy Plant and move the CDR to a new three-story, 37,000-square-foot facility attached to Babcock Hall. The \$32 million cost is being covered equally by state funding and private donations, and construction is slated to begin in late 2014 or early 2015 and finish by late 2017 or early 2018.

In less than a year, pledges have already exceeded the \$16 million requirement, mostly from cheese producers from around the nation. Fundraising co-chairmen Lou Gentile and David Fuhrmann said the response was a tribute to the quality of the work done at the CDR, which has played a huge role in helping grow the cheese industry in Wisconsin and the rest of the world over the past 25 years.

“The addition and the expansion is long overdue. We’re just happy to be part of it,” said Fuhrmann, president and CEO of Baraboo-based Foremost Farms. “It was really, really rewarding to see the industry’s response.”

Gentile, CEO of Plymouth-based cheesemaker Sargento, said about half of the \$16 million came from “a little more than a handful of big contributors.” But what he found significant was the number of smaller companies that also contributed.

“They are smaller but high-quality operations throughout the state who want to be a part of it and put in a relatively equal contribution based on the size of their operations,” Gentile said. “I wouldn’t diminish any contribution based on the size.”

World-class training ground

The biggest of six centers covering 10 sites affiliated with the Dairy Research Institute, Wisconsin’s CDR employs 35 people and has an annual budget of \$4 million.

It impresses as a research and development center, as cheesemakers from the tiniest factories to the biggest conglomerates show up with products to be tested, fixed and researched. The CDR is “the research arm of the Wisconsin dairy industry,” said John Umhoefer, executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association.

Added Lucey: “It makes more sense to have a central R&D with world-class researchers instead of having a company spending \$10 (million) to \$20 million and beyond to create one themselves. It’s important to find that niche, find that space.”

The CDR also educates. The food science program in the UW-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is among the best in the country, and the number of students in the program has grown to around 150. Lucey said graduates usually get multiple job offers with good salaries. “They are seeing this as a good employment opportunity,” he added.

Meantime, short courses ranging from a day to a week draw 900 to 1,400 students a year to the CDR. Most of them come from the business world.

“They see the breadth of the programs and the quality of the programs are really important for their companies,” Lucey said. “It’s cheaper for them to invest in this building, so we can do more training for the future instead of them doing the training themselves.”

The CDR also runs the Master Cheesemaking program that is credited with helping turn around the Wisconsin cheese industry.

Prior to the start of the program around 20 years ago, cheesemakers traveled to Europe to learn the trade and become artisans of the finest specialty cheeses. The Master Cheesemaking program brought top artisans to Madison to teach and made them mentors for the rest of the industry.

Soon after, the specialty cheese industry in Wisconsin took off. It produces 50 percent of the specialty cheese in the nation and is responsible for turning the United States into a net exporter of cheese.

“It basically raised the profile of the state, raised the profile of the industry. You went from being cheeseheads to making skilled, world-class products and you pass it on to the next generation. That’s a vital part about it,” said Lucey, a native of Ireland who came to the CDR in 1999 and has been its director for two years.

‘Kind of embarrassing’

The CDR’s success and innovation has come despite its physical shortcomings.

The facility is clean and the equipment at the Babcock Hall Dairy Plant works, but it’s so outdated that faculty members take students on field trips to show them what a real dairy looks like and how it operates. And since they must operate within such high health and safety standards, workers making cheese and other products there sometimes have to work triple time to get the same results they’d get with modern equipment, Lucey said.

“The place is kind of embarrassing,” said Fuhrmann. “It’s amazing that they’ve been able to do what they’ve done there.”

The new facility will include new labs and teaching facilities, and the rebuilt dairy plant will have the latest equipment. Planners expect it will attract more of the world’s best researchers and cement its status as the best in the country.

“The sky is the limit for what can happen there,” added Fuhrmann.

It’s fitting since Wisconsin is known as America’s Dairyland, Lucey said.

“This is going to be their first impression of Wisconsin and its dairy industry for some people,” he added. “So we want to put on a good show and a good face for them.”

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