



DISCUSSION GROUPS

By Kathy Barrett

Farmers say the best source of information is other farmers who have real-world experience

What is a Dairy Profit Discussion Group?

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Farmers drove the establishment of the Dairy Profit Discussion Group Program in New York. And they continue to be central to the program's success. Farmers on the Center for Dairy Excellence Dairy Task Force, some who had experience with discussion groups, recognized their value in increasing farm profitability. They made the establishment of the groups a priority for the Center, which financially supports the program.

Since the Dairy Profit Discussion Group Program began in April of 2008, 38 discussion groups have formed in New York. The founding farmers were right – the groups have helped participating farms reach their business goals.

Dairy producers who aren't familiar with profit discussion groups have questions about how they work and their benefits. Here are some answers:

Q: What is a Dairy Profit Discussion Group?

A: It's 10 to 12 farmers who have something in common and agree to meet regularly to share their knowledge and expertise. The goal is to help farmer members enhance productivity, profitability and quality of life.

Q: What are the key components to a successful Dairy Profit Discussion Group?

A: First and foremost, members must have shared interests, goals and concerns so discussions are pertinent to them. Some groups form around herd size, others stage of career, such as young farmers, and still others around a particular management practice such as rotational grazing.

Secondly, groups must be self-directed; they set their own agendas. Those run the gamut from attempting to increase overall business profitability to improving a specific aspect of a dairy such as internal herd growth. Or a group may focus on a

management approach like organic milk production.

Farmer members must be engaged and interested in selecting group discussion topics. And they must be willing to share their knowledge and expertise.

The third component is a committed, competent facilitator who ensures the group discussions are pertinent and on track. Usually an agribusiness professional or Extension educator serves as facilitator.

Q: What's the value of a group to a farmer?

A: Time and again, farmers say the best source of information is other farmers. They're in the trenches implementing new practices or adapting known practices. Farmers' real-world experience coupled with academic, industry and research information brought by the facilitator and guest speakers is invaluable for farmers looking to improve their farm's profitability.

Q: What does the group discuss?

A: Members decide what topics to discuss and what activities to engage in. Discussions run the gamut – everything from the details of farm practices such as feeding rates for colostrum to big picture ideas about the dairy industry, including milk pricing and consumer perceptions of dairying.

Often a resource person will join a group to provide insight or information on a specific topic the group wants to discuss. For instance, at the request

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Since taking over leadership of the Dairy Profit Discussion Group program, Kathy Barrett has overseen the start-up of 38 groups.

FYI

Interested in joining a Dairy Profit Discussion Group? Contact Kathy Barrett, director of the program and a PRO-DAIRY team member, at 607-229-4357. Email: kfb3@cornell.edu. Also see the PRO-DAIRY website: www.ansci.cornell.edu/prodairy/program/discgroup.html Or call your area Cornell Cooperative Extension office.

The Manager, a special section prepared by PRO-DAIRY specialists, appears in *Eastern DairyBusiness* 12 times a year. In keeping with the PRO-DAIRY mission, The Manager helps strengthen the management skills of dairy producers and increase the profitability of the dairy industry. PRO-DAIRY, an educational program begun in 1988, is a joint venture of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Northeast agriservice organizations. For reprints of PRO-DAIRY's The Manager, contact Heather Howland, 272 Morrison Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853. Phone: (607) 255-4478 Email: hh96@cornell.edu

ment and accounting led to a discussion on managing conflict.

Guest speakers

Collecting data for effective accounting and analyzing the results can cause family conflicts. There are tough questions that must be answered: What information must be gathered? How should it be gathered? And how does a family make personal and business decisions based on that information?

The women in the discussion group took a proactive approach and held a program on managing conflict. Collins arranged for the Peacemaker Program, a Utica conflict resolution group, to present the program. This program was sponsored by New York FarmNet and Oneida County Department of Health.

One participant said afterwards, "I learned that I am responsible for the way I react to conflict."

Another noted, "I'm learning reflective listening."

Occasionally the group opens its meetings to others in the farming community, including family members, if the day's topic might be particularly helpful.

Such was the case when the group had a New York State policeman speak about vehicle signage and on- and off-farm vehicle registration. Nearly 30 farmers attended the meeting to learn firsthand about the regulations and to ask questions on how they are applied on their dairies.

The Women Farming Today Dairy Profit Discussion Group takes a hiatus through the summer. But come fall, the women will begin meeting again, ready to tackle new ideas, learn from each other, impact the profitability of their dairies and improve the quality of life for those involved.

As one participant said, "This is a great asset to our county." □

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of a herd managers discussion group, professor Rodrigo Bicalho, a veterinarian with the Cornell Veterinary College, spoke about the effects of twins and stillborn calves on the future milk production of the dam. Topics really depend on members' interests and what they need to know at the moment.

Q: Who leads Dairy Profit Discussion Groups?

A: Usually an agribusiness person such as a local nutritionist or an Extension educator serves as the facilitator. Many groups have co-facilitators – someone from Extension and agribusiness – and this seems to work well.

Q: What kinds of activities might a discussion group do?

A: It's common for groups to visit dairies, both those of their members and of non-members. These visits focus on a particular production or management practice of interest to the group.

Some groups focus on collecting and analyzing farm financial data which is then used to benchmark within the group and against industry averages.

Q: How will any data collected be used?

A: Most groups don't share a lot of data at the onset. But as mem-

bers meet and become more comfortable with each other, they decide which farm data to share, if at all.

Benchmarking within groups may be based on production or financial data. The groups that do financial benchmarking decide ahead of time what data to collect, who to share it with and sign confidentiality agreements so that everyone feels comfortable.

Q: If I join a dairy profit discussion group, how can I get the most out of membership?

A: The most effective discussion groups have farmers who are interested in what other farmers are doing and are willing to share what they do on their dairies. Farmers should come to a group with a respect for their fellow farmers and a real interest in learning from them. Also, you must be willing to let others learn from your experiences – both successes and mistakes.

Q: How do discussion groups differ from profit or advisory teams?

A: Both discussion groups and profit or advisory teams are excellent methods for helping dairies increase profitability. They differ in this way: Discussion groups have 10 to 12 farmers working toward their individual goals; profit and advisory teams focus on one farm with several consulting team members. The farmer works with the team to set goals, decide what data to collect and how to monitor progress. □