

DISCUSSION GROUPS

By Kathy Barrett

Farm women come together to support each other and to share their knowledge to strengthen their families and their businesses

# Women Farming Today discusses dairy and more

**When Bonnie Collins started a farm women's dairy profit discussion group in Oneida County, N.Y., she had one purpose: "My original intent was to support women in farming," says the county's farm business management educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension.**

The group has met that objective plus much more for the 13 women who participate. They tackle everything from accounting to conflict management – all with the goals of improving business profitability and enhancing quality of life.

The women in the group are all dairy farmers and represent herds ranging in size from 30 cows to 800. They're either part of sole proprietorships or partnerships. And more than half of the women in the group work with in-laws in some capacity; all have children.

Women Farming Today meets at 10:30 a.m. the fourth Thursday of each month, except during the summer, at the Extension office. The two-hour meeting is divided into two segments. For the first

hour, the group has an informal discussion on a topic of interest, often related to what's going on at members' dairies. Topics have ranged from farm vehicle requirements and safety, updates on USDA programs offered through the local FSA office, media relations and local health resources for the uninsured and under-insured. Collins acts as the facilitator.

By consensus, the group picks the program it wants for the second

hour. Issues discussed include milk price and managing communication with employees, managers and family.

**Help where needed**

Early on, it became clear that accounting was an important topic for the Women Farming Today discussion group. All the women play a role to some degree in their dairy's accounting and financial management. They wanted to increase their levels of expertise and comfort with accounting software.

The group chose to learn more about Quick Books, a common software program on dairy farms. Collins, who is also an accountant, provided general training on accounting software and then one-on-one sessions for group members.

The power and value of any dairy profit discussion group often come from members' interactions. That's true for Women Farming Today. Group members support each other during meetings and share their experience on such things as entering items on the computer or reports they've found useful in Quick Books.

Having and understanding the information available to monitor cash flow has been a tremendous help, especially during the current milk-price slump. "Tracking expenses enables you to better run the business," says Lisa Frost, a dairy producer and group member from Sauquoit, N.Y.

Not surprisingly, discussions on financial manage-



**"My original intent was to support women in farming," says Bonnie Collins (right) about starting the Women Farming Today Dairy Discussion Group in Oneida County, N.Y. Mary Fero is a staff member of Oneida County Cooperative Extension.**

**FYI**

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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." □

### What is a Dairy Profit Discussion Group

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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. □