

DISCUSSION GROUPS

By Kathy Barrett

The owners and employees of Scipio Springs Dairy gain from participating in Dairy Profit Discussion Groups

Dairy invests in discussion groups

Scipio Springs Dairy, an 800-cow farm located in Scipio, N.Y., takes advantage of discussion groups in several ways. Members of the dairy participate in three different discussion groups.

This wave of participation began with Scipio Springs Dairy's owners Bill Morgan and Jon Gilbert. They're members of a discussion group that focuses on the management practices and decisions that produce successful business performance.

The group members commit to participating in the Cornell Farm Business Summary and Profit Monitor Program. They then share their data with other members of the group. Whether it's feed efficiency or individual cost factors, the data allow the group members to ask each other how they get their results and discuss how practices are implemented on other dairies. Confidentiality is strictly adhered to.

Jason Karzsies, PRO-DAIRY farm business management specialist, facilitates the group which gathers twice a year for overnight meetings. The first afternoon, members look at data from the summary and Profit Monitor. Then they discuss the practices

behind the different dairies' numbers.

The next morning the discussion group tours a dairy of one of its members. The benefits to this structure are evident. For example, during a data discussion, the group learned the dairy it was to visit has excellent labor efficiency. The next day during the farm tour, the group clearly saw that parlor efficiency drives the dairy's labor savings. Discussions followed about training, milking routine, scheduling and facility layout.

"Hearing how other farms achieve their results helps Jon and me make better decisions for our business," Morgan says.

Morgan and Gilbert's positive experience in the discussion group prompted them to encourage their dairy's herd and feed managers to participate in discussion groups geared for their responsibilities. Consequently, Jen Minde and Diesel Hitt both participate in the Cayuga (County) Herd Managers Group and Tom Yale, Scipio Springs' feed manager, is a member of the Cayuga Feed Managers Group.

Herd managers meet

"Being relatively fresh out of college, I saw the group as a way to draw on the experience of others in the group," says Hitt. "It's also a great way to get new ideas and review what we do on a daily basis."

Minde agrees: "Bill and Jon really encouraged me to join the herd managers group because they have always gotten a lot from the groups they've been in over the years."

Both Minde and Hitt are active participants in the group. They willingly share their own experiences

FYI

■ Kathy Barrett is the director of the Dairy Profit Discussion Group program within PRO-DAIRY. Contact her at 607-229-4357. Email: kfb3@cornell.edu

■ You can find more information about discussion groups at this website: www.ansci.cornell.edu/prodairy/program/discgroup.html



The Scipio Springs Dairy owners, Jon Gilbert (far left) and Bill Morgan (far right) encouraged employees Diesel Hitt, Tom Yale and Jen Minde to join groups related to their job responsibilities.



Diesel Hitt and Jen Minde, herd managers at Scipio Spring Dairy, learn from other people in their Dairy Profit Discussion Group while also gaining a network of friends and contacts.

and ask questions of others. The two suggest topics for group discussion and recommend farms worth visiting.

The Cayuga Herd Managers Group meets monthly for two hours at noon. As with all discussion groups, members choose the topics discussed. The group has covered everything from calf and milking management to the effects of twinning and stillborns on future production. I co-facilitate the group with Dan Button, the nutritionist with Cayuga Marketing.

Early on, the group decided to visit Adirondack Farms in Peru, N.Y., to learn how the dairy manages its cows for high production while making do with limited facilities. At Adirondack Farms, the group spent several hours walking through the dairy and talking to the farm's managers about every aspect of the dairy.

The next morning, the group toured the Miner Institute, an agricultural research facility in Chazy. Rick Grant, the institute's director, presented the latest research on stocking density.

The discussions, presentations and tours lead to changes at Scipio Springs. "We have switched to relying on our pocket Dairy Comp in the barns much more after discussing the logistics of how to get the most out of it," say Minde.

Discussion groups do more than simply exchange ideas between members. They



Bill Morgan, co-owner of Scipio Springs Dairy, Scipio, N.Y., benefits from hearing how other dairies reach their performance goals during group discussions.

enable members to build a network of people who they can rely on for ideas and support.

"The network you make is very valuable," says Minde. "From our group, there are several people who have become good friends and who I can call for ideas on different issues."

Hitt seconds that observation. "I think getting a good network of other herd managers is one of the most valuable things. It allows for a free flow of information when I have a question or a problem."

Feed managers meet

Tom Yale, Scipio Springs' feed manager, was part of a discussion group earlier in his career and knew the value of meeting with other people to talk about work. "It's an opportunity to see how other farms are handling certain problems and to see who is trying new things and how they are working," Yale says.

So when the opportunity arose to get involved in the Cayuga Feed Managers Group, Yale jumped at it. The group meets monthly at noon for a working lunch.

Because feeding management is an extension of a dairy's nutrition program, Dan Button and I co-facilitate this group, as well.

Button works with all of the dairies in the group so the meeting is an opportunity for him to talk about what he sees



Tom Yale, Scipio Springs Dairy's feed manager, changed how he mixes feed after discussions and demonstrations during group meetings.

across the farms. The group has discussed many aspects of bunk silo and feed bunk management.

"After discussing feed consistency in our group, I have switched to shaving all the corn silage I will need for the day before the first load of feed every morning and mixing it with the bucket so the feed is more consistent throughout all of the loads," Yale says.

Like his coworkers, Yale finds the discussion group valuable on several counts. "Talking with other feed managers about the way they do things, making new friends and meeting up with old ones" are just a few of the advantages to being in the group, he says.

Everyone at Scipio Springs Dairy who is part of a Dairy Profit Discussion Group realizes they get out of the group only as much as they put into it.

"You will get much more out of the group if you talk and ask questions than if you sit and aren't heard," says Hitt. "I suggest (group members) be open and honest with what they do with the topics being discussed.." □