

A year after 'pasture meeting': DPAC meets with 200 in Kinzers

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Special for Farmshine

KINZERS, Pa.—One year, almost to the day, after the well-known 'pasture meeting' at Levi Fisher's farm in Gordonville—where 500 had gathered to speak with lawmakers during the height of the dairy crisis—nearly 200 Lancaster County dairy farmers gathered at the Kinzer Fire Hall Thursday evening, August 12 for a follow up.

It was the second of two meetings that week, hosted by Sensenig's Feed Mill, New Holland, to give area dairymen the opportunity to hear from the Dairy Policy Action Coalition (DPAC) on milk pricing and dairy policy. (The meeting in Ephrata August 10 was reported two weeks ago in Farmshine.)

"We all know change is coming, and that change has to take place in Washington," said Jake Esh, a DPAC board member with a dairy farm in Gordonville. "We have to send someone down there to get a foot in the door."

For DPAC, that someone is lifelong dairy farmer and former state ag secretary Dennis Wolff, who is a partner in Versant Strategies, a government relations firm based in Harrisburg.

Wolff told the crowd that of all the meetings he has attended over the years, the "one that stands out very clear in my mind is the 'pasture' meeting last summer."

He gave the group a sense for how things operate in Harrisburg and Washington. For example, the staffers of lawmakers in Washington have an average age of about 24, and most are not from farms. Part of the process is educating those young people about the challenges on the dairy farm.

"DPAC formed after countless meetings across Pennsylvania and in Ohio when the dairy producers were at their lowest point," said Wolff. "Our challenge was how can we be different. Everyone was frustrated. This group looks for common ground."



(Above) Dennis Wolff answers questions from the crowd of nearly 200 dairy farmers and a dozen local agribusiness representatives about DPAC's activities and progress. He was joined by DPAC board members Jake Esh, a Gordonville dairyman, and Dan Stoltzfus, of Stoltzfus Farms, Honey Brook, along with Bernie Morrissey, who set the wheels in motion to form the coalition back in November of 2009 after a meeting of the Lancaster / Lebanon dairy advisory committee at Esh's farm. That committee had been meeting biweekly and then monthly to continue communication with lawmakers after the August 2009 'pasture' meeting of 500 at Levi Fisher's farm in Gordonville (below). Photos by Sherry Bunting



He explained how price discovery in the dairy industry is not good, and that market transparency became the heart of DPAC's short term goals.

"Dairy is a \$35 billion a year industry, and yet at the farm gate, milk is priced off a market where a handful of buyers trade less than 1% of the cheese and less than 2% of the butter. It's just not right," said Wolff. "That's why we decided to tackle this. We need daily electronic reporting of product prices and sales volumes to dilute the impact of the CME (Chicago Mercantile Exchange)."

He explained that the NASS Survey, right now, captures the thin trading on the CME and makes it "official" reporting every Friday the sales by processors for the previous week.

"Dairy is priced in the rear-view mirror," said Wolff. "We want to see it get up to date, like the beef reporting, and then we want to see more products reported."

Wolff explained that DPAC is unique because "We represent you the dairy producer, and the board is made up of grassroots producers. There's no other organization quite like that in Washington or Harrisburg."

DPAC board members Dan Z. Stoltzfus, Honey Brook, and Jake Esh, Gordonville, told some of the history of DPAC's formation.

"There's an extreme amount of work going into DPAC," said Stoltzfus, adding that he got involved because dairy farmers have to step to the plate and try to figure out what can be done to improve the situation and because over

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the past 30 years, "the dairy farmers lost input into what's happening."

"Now, more is happening than what you think," said Stoltzfus. "But it's not going to happen overnight."

He and Esh talked about how DPAC worked to get electronic reporting for dairy to improve the timeliness and accuracy of price reporting. "But it's weekly reporting, not daily. We're not going to sit back and quit," said Stoltzfus. "There are still options."

He encouraged farmers to call their Congressmen and simply, "tell them you want daily reporting." (See related story beginning on page 3).

Stoltzfus and Esh also told the crowd that DPAC is studying the current four-class milk pricing system. They reported that during DPAC's monthly board meeting earlier the same day, a committee was assigned to look at a one class system and to move away from the end product price formulas that have the "set" make allowances.

On supply management, Stoltzfus and Esh said that there is one thing DPAC has consensus on, and that is whatever comes through on supply management in the next Farm Bill, they want it out of the control of those who are now controlling the CWT program.

"Whether it's like CWT or something else, we want it run by dairy farmers," said Stoltzfus. "That will take a lot of effort."

A take home message for the evening was for dairymen to "think positive."

The farmers' questions showed how important this is to them, and the tone of the evening was concern for the future of family dairy farms along with the hope that DPAC, as a grassroots coalition of dairy producers, can make a positive difference.

Stay tuned for more next week in Farmshine.