

More historic grassroots involvement: Producer's right-to-vote tops action list *'Meeting of the minds' from 10 states in Tennessee*



Southeast producers: *'Everything on the line'*

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ATHENS, Tenn.—They came from all corners of the Southeast—22 dairy producers from 10 states—and by the end of the day last Thursday (August 5), the group assembled had identified six key action items for short- and long-term dairy policy. During the daylong meeting, they also shared consensus to form a southeast action group with DPAC (Dairy Policy Action Coalition), setting their next meeting for early September in Atlanta, Georgia, where they will chart a course of next steps.

The idea for the “summit” came from DPAC’s southern ad hoc board members at the conclusion of the coalition’s July teleconference meeting. Chairman Cliff Hawbaker, Chambersburg, Pa. and vice-chair Rob Barley, Conestoga, Pa. traveled to the Athens, Tennessee meeting, primarily to listen, but also to bring a few ideas to the table.

Maury Cox, executive director of the Kentucky Dairy Development Council and Julie Walker of Agri-Voice worked together on the preparations. Several years ago, Cox had been involved in a “Southeast steering committee,” which at that time had identified some changes to seek through the USDA administrative hearing process. But the result didn’t come through as hoped at that time.

This time, the group assembled reaches further and covers more states. It was a grassroots group of dairy producers, spanning virtually all milk cooperatives and southeastern producer groups. A few state Farm Bureaus were represented there as well: To observe.

There is a sense of urgency in the Southeast these days. On August 5, the 22 producers who participated in the grassroots meeting were thoughtful and motivated.

It was truly a “meeting of the minds” among these grassroots industry leaders. Unity of purpose was the hope laid out on the table.

Topping the list of milk pricing and dairy policy actions the group focused on was the American ideal: A true vote for every dairy producer in the policies and regulations that affect the future survival of the region’s dairy farms and the infrastructure of businesses and jobs that rely on them.

“Bloc voting has to go,” they agreed.

The short list of action items at the end of the day included:

- 1) Reforming the producer voting process for Federal Order Administrative Rule changes. (Change the “all or nothing” voting procedure.)
- 2) Eliminate “bloc voting” so producers have a vote.
- 3) Increase Federal Order Location Differentials.
- 4) Eliminate Transportation Credits for Federal Orders 5 and 7.
- 5) Influence National Milk Producers Federation’s Foundation for the Future.
- 6) Work towards Country of Origin Labeling and sustaining dairy product Standards of Identity.

These are issues that resonate throughout the nation. Certainly the concept of every producer having a vote has never been more important. The right to vote is also a common-sense, American ideal: The foundation of a free country. Dairy producers attended the Southeast meeting from Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas, along with two DPAC executive board producers from Pennsylvania. The day began with each producer setting forth their thoughts and expectations for the meeting, which then moved on to setting the previ-

(Above) Twenty-two Southeast dairy producers and two producer board members of DPAC convened for a Southeast “meeting of the minds” in Athens, Tennessee last week. Attendees by state were as follows: Virginia - Roger Jefferson; North Carolina - Ben Shelton, Norman Jordan, and Bradley Johnston; Georgia - Everett Williams, Pete Wright, and Farrah Newberry; Florida - Dale Eades, Ron St. John, and Ed Henderson; Kentucky - Bob Klingenfus, H.H. Barlow, Terry Rowlett, Maury Cox (and Joe Cain with Kentucky Farm Bureau); Tennessee - Jack Fritz, Bob Strasser, John Harrison, Randy Davis, Joe Pearson, and Julie Walker (along with Ryan King and Clint Crisp from Tenn. Farm Bureau); Mississippi - Tanya Rushing and A.L. “Sonny” Boyd; Alabama - Laird Cole; Arkansas - Mike Fisher and Kenneth Hall. And from the DPAC board, chairman Cliff Hawbaker and vice chair Rob Barley, both of Pennsylvania.

(Below) After the meeting, discussion continued before producers made their long trips home. Pictured clockwise from left are H.H. Barlow, Ben Shelton, Cliff Hawbaker, Rob Barley and Roger Jefferson. Photos by Sherry Bunting



ously mentioned action priorities.

“Taking a whole day out of our schedules down here for a meeting in mid-August, is a hard thing to do,” observed Randy Davis of East Tennessee. “But this is too important. If we as a group can come to consensus, that will be a big step.”

A unifying thought for the day, besides the right to vote on Federal Order changes, was the concern about how Transportation Credits have altered the southern milk marketing landscape and put native dairymen at a disadvantage to distant milk shippers providing supplemental milk to the Southeast market.

As was repeated often through the day: “All we want is a level playing field.” Beyond the Transportation Credits, is the concern about milk diversions. Diversions to manufacturing from distant supplies that qualify each month to pool on the Southeast orders, has eroded the Class I utilization for local producers.

As Florida producer Dale Eaves put it:

“As dairy producers, we all have everything on the line.”

Floridian Ron St. John echoed that and added that, “There has got to be common ground. We need to move forward as producers.”

In keeping with DPAC’s motto, Roger Jefferson, of Virginia, said it is time for producers to take back control of their industry.

John Harrison, of Tennessee, put a high priority on price discovery.

Bob Klingenfus, of Kentucky, noted he would like to see a more competitive market for milk.

The Southeast discussion probed many areas, and consensus developed early on key issues of common ground. Stay tuned for more on this story in a future edition of *Farmshine*.