

‘The train is moving, time to get on board’

Dairy producers unite to turn talk into action

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

EPHRATA, Pa.—“When you bring the minds of people together, you can get organized to start moving and get something done,” said Franklin County, Pennsylvania dairy producer Cliff Hawbaker after he was elected chairman of an emerging grassroots coalition of producers during an unprecedented meeting last Thursday (Nov. 19). “We had a great group of producers here, and now it’s our responsibility to keep the motivation going and growing for action on the issues affecting our milk prices.”

Last Thursday’s meeting was just the beginning. And it was unique in that 20 dairy producers—representing 11 Pennsylvania counties and one county in eastern Ohio—gathered at the Ephrata office of Bernard C. Morrissey Insurance to learn more about an opportunity to form what they later voted to name the Dairy Policy Action Coalition (DPAC).

As Morrissey puts it: “The train is moving, and it’s time to get on board. We want any dairy producers, or group of producers—barring none—to be a part of this... The purpose is to give producers a unified voice going to Washington, or individual state capitols, on policies and issues that affect their milk pricing.”

In fact, the group assembled on Thursday unanimously approved three immediate priorities for the purposes of beginning the coalition’s action on milk pricing and supply management. Those immediate priorities revolve around mandatory reporting, price discovery, and competition in the marketplace.

Unprecedented times call for unprecedented action. As Farmshine readers are well aware, dairy producers across the state of Pennsylvania, and in eastern Ohio, have been meeting together in small action groups to affect change. These grassroots groups have also hosted very large meetings drawing hundreds of their peers. Thursday’s first organizational meeting for DPAC included two or three representatives from each of eight such regional groups engaged with a single purpose: To actively participate in dairy policy that affects milk pricing.

“It’s about ‘controlling your own destiny,’” said Morrissey. “We’re leaving those words on this screen in this office until the price of milk goes up.”

The idea for building a producer coalition started forming in the back of Morrissey’s mind ever since mid-September, when he was invited to a meeting of Lebanon and Berks County producers as they prioritized issues to discuss the following day with their congressman, Rep. Tim Holden.

“Nelson Troutman, a producer from Berks County, got me involved by inviting me to that meeting in September at the Lebanon Ag Expo Center,” Morrissey recalls.

Then, in the first week of November, Morrissey was a guest during a meeting of producers from Lancaster, Chester and Lebanon counties. That group has been meeting regularly to work on its action outline ever since 500 dairy farmers gathered for a pasture meeting in Gordonville on August 17.

In between meeting with the groups in Lebanon and in Lancaster, Morrissey also traveled through Pennsylvania's Northern Tier, where he visited with several dairymen in Bradford, Tioga and Potter counties. He heard their message, too, loud and clear: 'It's time for action, and it has to come from the grassroots.'

Morrissey started thinking about what could be done to turn all of this talk into action, and get producers together to help them take their individual small group efforts to the next level.

"I shared my idea with the Lancaster group during their meeting on November 9," Morrissey explained during his introduction on Thursday. "I told them: 'We have to get farmers together, and we need to hire a good team—people who know the system, and who understand milk marketing—to help carry your message.'"

Morrissey worked with Sherry Bunting, a free-lance writer, on the invitation list for Thursday's meeting because she had attended many regional grassroots producer meetings over the past three months.

Bunting contacted the eight groups who had organized such local grassroots efforts—from southeast Pennsylvania, through central and south central Pennsylvania, to Pennsylvania's northern tier, into northwest and southwest Pennsylvania and into eastern Ohio.

Morrissey made available the conference room at his office. And since the room could handle around 20 people at the table, the simplest way to approach the invitations for start-up was to notify each of the eight regional grassroots groups and ask them each to send two or three producers to the table.

At the table were "English" and Amish dairymen, representing all types of dairy operations from small herds of 40 cows to larger herds of 2000 cows. The group of 20 attendees included producers who ship milk in two Federal Orders (Northeast and Mid-East) and through an array of milk cooperatives—from DFA, Dairylea, Land O'Lakes and Maryland-Virginia to Mount Joy, Lanco-Pennland, and Farmers Union, as well as direct shippers.

In welcoming the producers, Morrissey stressed that, "This effort is not to replace other farm groups or milk cooperatives. This effort is about forming a grassroots coalition of producers, thinking outside the box, and actively participating in the process of change."

He told producers this would be a big undertaking and that it would be a relationship that demands commitment. "You are the salt of the earth," he said. "You feed a hungry world through God. If you go down, what happens to our hungry world?"

After more than three hours of discussion and a break for lunch, the 20 dairy producers had voted on a name, a chairman, and three immediate priorities to get started on.

They voted their intention to hire former Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Dennis C Wolff and Versant Strategies to advise and represent them. Versant Strategies is a government relations and advocacy firm in which Wolff is now a partner.

DPAC also voted their intention to hire Sherry Bunting's Agriculture Writing Services as their correspondence secretary to keep minutes, assist in communications, and ensure the transparency of the coalition's efforts. She will be working with DPAC to help facilitate the flow of communication.

DPAC will be working on how to structure that flow of communication, which could include everything from updates in farm publications to web-based tools.

“Because this started from the grassroots, it will continue from the grassroots as groups of farmers come together to grow this coalition and as the coalition finds the points of connection for sharing the progress of its actions,” Hawbaker explains. “Those points of connection will also need to facilitate the exchange of ideas and input.”

The flow of communication is already happening by word-of-mouth as producers go back to their regions and talk with other producers to spread the word.

The target is milk pricing, and that means any policy or regulation that affects milk pricing—from price discovery, inventory reporting, federal order reform, and the support price system, to risk management, global trade and mechanisms for supply management.

Denny Wolff gave a brief overview of the complexities of dairy policy, which he has been involved with since 2005. He stressed the importance of finding common ground and speaking with one voice.

“Federal dairy policy is not working,” he said. “Markets are too volatile, and they lack transparency in price discovery. Advance pricing and NASS Survey lag times are also a concern.”

He encouraged the group to prioritize. “There is no shortage of issues,” said Wolff. “Pick a few specific things to start with, make a plan for that, and then move the initiative forward.”

Wolff explained that Versant Strategies has the experience and interest in the complexities that make the dairy business unique. All three partners—Wolff, John Barley and Dr. Mee Cee Baker—know what its like to clean out a barn, literally, and get manure on their boots.

He talked briefly about the process of developing and rolling out an action plan based on the priorities that are set by this farmer-driven coalition, and he highlighted the importance of educating legislators and policymakers on the issues affecting milk prices.

“There have been countless discussions and lots of information gathered,” said Wolff. “The information is all there. The point now is: What would the list look like if it were prioritized?”

In taking talk to the next level of action, Bernie Morrissey put his money where his mouth is. When he introduced this opportunity to form a coalition of producers, he not only offered his company’s staff, his office and his toll-free phone number as a “hub” of operations for DPAC, he also offered to spearhead fundraising for the coalition effort, including his own startup donation of \$6000 to cover the first month of operations. He is looking for other agribusinesses to join him in sponsoring this 100% dairy producer coalition.

Producers who want to be part of sponsoring this effort to “control your own destiny,” will also be asked to give a minimum donation.

“This will be a big undertaking,” Morrissey said. “Since producers don’t have the time to spend, it’s important to have a good team representing you and carrying that ball.”

The group discussed a single-bullet approach instead of a shotgun approach. The focus is squarely on the policies and issues that affect milk pricing; taking the information and putting it in the form of policy changes.

“That’s what stimulates discussion (among decision-makers) and that’s how change takes place,” said Wolff.

Earlier in the meeting, each producer had the opportunity to share their expectations, and several common themes emerged. Each, in their own way, said they want to develop a vehicle that can get producers together and speaking with one voice. They want this to be a grassroots group that truly represents the dairy farmers. They want a less complicated, more transparent market, with more stability in pricing. And above all, they indicated their belief that a grassroots producer effort is the only way to see changes made in the right direction. They are tired of talking and ready to see action.

“For me, it’s hard not to get involved in a dairy industry that is struggling,” says Hawbaker. “What makes this coalition different is: This is an action organization that will be supported by donations, not dues, and we represent every dairyman, working for a pricing system that is less complicated and easier to understand. Producers are looking for something lasting with some control in our pricing and supply. And as for free enterprise in America, we want to keep it alive. If you own a cow, you are theoretically a member of this coalition effort, which has the purpose of action on issues that affect our milk pricing.”

While the Dairy Policy Action Coalition (DPAC) is getting its start here with producers from Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio, attending dairymen repeatedly voiced their desire to see it reach beyond state borders. In fact, a few producers said they came to this meeting to see if this could be the group that can do that: bring producers together from region, to state, to nation.

It’s a step-by-step process with no more time left to waste. DPAC voted unanimously to immediately pursue federal mandatory product price reporting to include more dairy products (i.e. fresh Italian cheeses, yogurt, etc.) and daily reporting. Wolff noted this mandatory electronic reporting is already written into the 2008 Farm Bill, but it needs to be implemented by USDA, and the funds to do it need to be appropriated.

In conjunction with this immediate priority, producers included an immediate action item to work on decreasing the lag time in the weekly NASS Survey, on which their milk prices are based. And they seek mandatory reporting, with auditing, for the NASS inventory reports.

With the USDA and Department of Justice (DOJ) preparing to begin an information gathering effort across the country in 2010, DPAC voted to include anti-trust investigations as an immediate priority in conjunction with these USDA / DOJ workshops.

Attending the first organizational meeting of DPAC last Thursday were: From Berks County, PA – Zack Meck, Womelsdorf, and Nelson Troutman, Richland; from Blair County, PA – Eric Frederick, Rodney Metzler and Max Smith, Martinsburg; from Bradford County, PA – Jon Jenkins, Columbia Crossroads, and Gary Kline, Troy; from Butler County, PA – Jim Kennedy, Butler; From Chester County, PA – Daniel Stoltzfus, Honey Brook; from Franklin County, PA – Cliff Hawbaker and Doug Martin, Chambersburg; from Holmes County, OH – Alan Kozak, Millersburg; from Lancaster County, PA – Jake Esh, Gordonville, Paul Horning, Stevens, Rob Barley, Conestoga; from Lebanon County, PA – Dan Brandt, Annville; from Perry County, PA – Logan Bower, Blain, and Duane Hertzler, Loysville; from Potter County, PA – Dale Hoffman, Shinglehouse; and from Warren County, PA – Sheryl Vanco, Bear Lake.

DPAC plans its second organizational meeting in December to work through more details, so stay tuned for updates.

“Time is of the essence,” said Morrissey. “We’re asking farmers and agribusinesses to jump on board because the train is moving. Your sponsorships will keep it moving.”

For information about DPAC sponsorship, contact 800-422-8335, or write to: DPAC, 890 North Reading Road, Ephrata, PA 17522.

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