

June Dairy Month Open Houses: Learning Events to Improve Consumer Understanding of Modern Animal Agriculture

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Summary and Implications

Three dairy open houses as part of June Dairy Month events were conducted to provide the public the opportunity to experience and learn first-hand about the efforts made daily on modern dairies to achieve cow care, cow comfort and health, hygienic milking procedures, local cropping systems that provide quality feed for the dairy herd, manure management and land stewardship, respect for family and non-family workers, and overall quality and safety of milk and dairy products. These events were a product of industry partnerships. The three events reached 4800+ participants. Surveys performed at two events showed many participants had trust in dairy farmers and the dairy industry prior to the event, but post tour surveys showed enhancement in their knowledge of modern dairy practices that assure animal health and comfort, product quality and safety, and environmental stewardship and preservation. (with 100% of participants improving their views and trust in modern dairy farming). Most concerns encompassed nutrient and environmental management (4% of respondents).

Introduction

A large percentage of the US population lives in an urban or suburban environment, and are slightly disconnected from agriculture and food production. At the same time, there is increasing interest and concern in the general population about food safety, quality, and sustainability. While many exercise trust in the dairy and other food systems, a segment of anxious but uninformed consumers appear to readily accept viewpoints of anti-livestock/anti-agriculture that are negative about animal care, environmental stewardship, and safety/quality of dairy products.

ISU Dairy Team/ NEIDF/ WIDA Program Response

ISU Extension Dairy Team partnered with Iowa's dairy producer and industry associations, other farm and commodity organizations (ISU site) and the regional dairy check-off organization, Midwest Dairy Association, to plan and host Dairy Farm Open House events as part of "June Dairy Month" activities. Partners included: Northeast Iowa Dairy Foundation (host), Western Iowa Dairy Alliance (host), Iowa State Dairy Association; Midwest Dairy Association, Iowa Farm Bureau, Iowa Dairy Processors

(Roberts Dairy, Swiss Valley Farms, Anderson Erickson, AMPI, and Wells Blue Bunny), Domino's Pizza (ISU site) and the Iowa Egg, Pork, Beef, Soybean, and Corn commodity groups (ISU).

The purpose of the summer 2014 Open Houses (one in NE Iowa at the Calmar Dairy Center, one in central Iowa at the ISU Dairy Farm, and one in NW Iowa at a large family-owned dairy farm) was to provide experiential events whereby the general public could see and learn first-hand about the efforts made daily on modern dairies to achieve cow care, cow comfort and health, hygienic milking procedures, local cropping systems that provide quality feed for the dairy herd, manure management and land stewardship, and respect for family and non-family workers.

At all open house sites, the planning partners incorporated a tour of the dairy with designated stations to showcase and educate on specific attributes of dairy farms (animal comfort and health, milking practices, product safety and quality, environmental stewardship). Members of the dairy community—dairy producers and agri-professionals—served as tour guides and narrators. In this way, guests learned facts about dairy herd management and production directly from the people who work on or serve the farm. The events also incorporated opportunities to showcase and taste existing and new dairy products.

The ISU Dairy Open House also had an agricultural learning center that encompassed interactive learning displays from all the commodity groups as well as an interactive agricultural display and maze on environmental stewardship. The ISU event incorporated a survey to assess participant knowledge and interests in the dairy industry and dairy practices.

The NE Iowa Dairy Foundation hosted an annual Breakfast on the Farm, with a purpose of educating consumers about the wholesomeness of dairy while eating a great breakfast. The family-oriented event includes a tour of the 250-cow dairy farm at the Dairy Center, a farm animal petting zoo, and interactive activities with NICC Dairy Science Club members. A post survey was also conducted.

Result and Discussion

A total of 4800+ participants were involved in these 3 events with many families and young children, and most participants from non-agricultural backgrounds. Guests at the ISU Open House and NEIDF Breakfast on the Farm were invited to complete surveys to rate their experience of the dairy tour and knowledge and trust of dairy practices. The survey results were very favorable and indicated success in achieving the goal to improve consumers' knowledge and understanding about modern dairy farms.

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Survey Results and Impacts

- A total of 4800+ participants were involved in these 3 events with many families and young children, and most participants from non-agricultural backgrounds and 340 post event surveys were completed.
 - 99% rated successful / educational (88% rating excellent; 11% rating very good (3.97/ 4.00 rating).
 - Prior to the event, 76% had a positive (65% extremely positive) opinion and trust in dairy farms.
 - Post workshop (PW), 99% believed dairies provided the best care and handling of animals.
 - PW, 98% believed dairies are protective of the environment and excel at environmental stewardship.
 - Post workshop, 99% stated dairies provided extremely safe and wholesome milk and dairy products.
- 100% supported growth of the dairy industry in Iowa.
 - Post workshop, 99+% stated modern dairies and dairy practices were impressive and had extreme confidence and trust in dairy farms and the dairy industry.
 - Participant's opinion of modern dairies following the event was positively and significantly increased.

Overall Findings:

- Attendees found the events to be worthwhile and would classify them as an A.
- Many participants had high trust in dairy producers and farms prior to event.
- Participant's opinion of modern dairy farms following the event was positively and significantly increased.