

Progressive Events: Dairy Strong headliners inspire and inform

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Dairy farmers and allied industry representatives attending the 2019 Dairy Strong conference received a mix of inspiration and practical information during the fifth annual event, held Jan. 23-24 in Madison, Wisconsin.

Dairy Strong annually brings together members of the Wisconsin-based Dairy Business Association (DBA) and Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative. DBA is a nonprofit, dairy policy advocacy organization comprised of Wisconsin dairy farmers, milk processors, vendors and business partners. Edge provides milk testing verification services and market information to dairy farmers in eight Midwestern states. It also advocates for dairy farmers on state and federal dairy policy issues.

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Keynote speakers

Headliners at Dairy Strong traditionally represent industries and organizations outside of dairy, sharing insights and inspiration dairy producers may incorporate into their own businesses. This year's speakers were:

Business consultant Molly Fletcher. As a sports agent who negotiated contracts worth more than \$500 million in her 20-year career, Fletcher entertained conference participants with stories about her business relationships with professional coaches and athletes. She described how the ability to “win” is heavily dependent on personal relationships, identifying four key attributes to success:

1. Maintain belief in an ability to evolve or change. “Lean into change because on the other side of change is magical,” she said.
2. Stay creative through discovery. Look for the gaps in yourself and in your business and determine how you can fill them.
3. Stay relational, not just transactional. Decide who deserves your energy and invest in them.
4. Recover fast from tough moments. In sports and business, top performers celebrate the best moments and recover quickly from setbacks.

Ken Schmidt, former communications director for Harley-Davidson USA. Taking Dairy Strong participants on a make-believe motorcycle ride through the countryside, he emphasized how passion for quality adds consumer value and creates customer loyalty.

“Our job is to get people excited not about what we do but about who we are,” he said. “We like people who make us feel wanted, needed, necessary, desired.”

Author and geopolitical strategist Peter Zeihan offered a somewhat sobering look at how global politics impact markets and economic trends. He warned that changing international and domestic consumption patterns, political and military intervention, security and protectionism, and climate and agricultural production could disrupt global markets and economics. He said China’s slowing population growth and New Zealand’s ability to produce and export dairy at low costs will have a direct impact on limiting U.S. dairy exports.

Other presentations included:

- *Ted McKinney, USDA undersecretary for trade and foreign agricultural affairs* (speaking via Skype), provided an update on the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and other federal programs and international events impacting the dairy industry.
- *New Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Secretary Brad Pfaff* stressed that diversity and unity were important to address the current challenges facing the state’s dairy industry. He also provided an update on the Wisconsin Dairy Task Force 2.0, a group of 31 people representing all aspects of the dairy supply chain, created with a goal of developing recommendations to strengthen the industry.

The task force has nine committees looking into specific focus areas: research and innovation, regulatory consistency, rural community mentality, developing a skilled

workforce, markets, access to capital, price volatility and profitability, consumer confidence and transitioning to the next generation.

Breakout sessions

Dairy Strong participants were able to pursue three “themed” tracks involving panel discussions and presentations:

- *Consumer trends.* Hannah Thompson-Weeman of Animal Agriculture Alliance provided an update on consumer research, and Madlyn Daley of Dairy Management Inc. and Helen Lundell of the Hartman Group described how consumers are driving change in today’s food culture.
- *Dairy technology.* Jeffrey Bewley of Alltech discussed the benefits of precision technology on a dairy, and Lee Kinnard of Kinnard Farms and Rob Plank of McLanahan described how a bedding dryer installed on Kinnard Farms was producing drier bedding and healthier cows.
- *Employee management and value-added dairying.* Panelists Liz Griffith of Tuls Dairies, Avalon, Wisconsin; Dan Rice of Prairieland Dairy LLC, Firth, Nebraska; and Doug Grotegut of Grotegut Dairy Farm LLC, Newton, Wisconsin, shared experiences utilizing Cultivate, an online educational service that allows clients to train, test and track their employees on information relevant to their daily activities on their dairy.

They were followed by a panel including James Baerwolf of Sassy Cow Creamery, Columbus, Wisconsin; Tom Crave of Crave Brothers Farm LLC, Waterloo, Wisconsin; and Jerry Jennissen of Jer-Lindy Farms/Redhead Creamery, Brooten, Minnesota. The trio discussed the opportunities, challenges and insights of starting and operating an on-farm dairy processing business.

Innovation Stage

The trade show area Innovation Stage provided brief updates on issues affecting dairy producers. Presentations included:

John Haeckel, CEO of Clean Fuel Partners, operates a methane digester near Dane, Wisconsin, which turns dairy manure and other organic waste into fuel. He summarized the benefits and challenges of operating a digester, urging dairy producers to explore several factors before considering installation of a digester on their farms.

“One of the things I hate is when developers say to farmers, ‘These things run themselves; you can take care of it in your spare time.’ I think that’s technically true for the first year or two of operation, but manure is an incredibly corrosive and caustic substance, and digesters don’t repair themselves. A digester is a continuous-process business,” Haeckel explained.

Dairy farmers Jessica Peters of Spruce Row Farm, Meadville, Pennsylvania, and

Katie Dotterer-Pyle of Cow Comfort Inn Dairy, Union Bridge, Maryland, teamed up for an entertaining presentation to help other dairy farmers use social media to serve as dairy advocates. In “Changing dairy: Starting with how we advocate,” they urged fellow producers to go beyond their social media “friends” and reach out to non-farm consumers.

They described how to educate those wanting to learn more about how and where their food is produced, withstand the comments from vegans and animal rights extremists, and be realistic when presenting the full story of day-to-day activities on a dairy farm.

Other Innovation Stage presentations covered the Dairy Revenue Protection (Dairy-RP) program, changes in tax law and feeding, calf and silage management strategies.

Finally, a Wisconsin Wine and Cheese Tasting and Pairing Stage enabled attendees to sample award-winning cheeses and learn how to combine cheese varieties with beverages as a fun way to tell the dairy story.

Elections

DBA and Edge held annual meetings and elections in conjunction with Dairy Strong.

The DBA board elected Tom Crave of Crave Brothers Farm in Waterloo, Wisconsin, as president. He succeeds Mike North, president of Commodity Risk Management Group, Platteville, Wisconsin, who will become president emeritus. Amy Penterman, who owns and operates Dutch Dairy with her husband near Thorp, Wisconsin, was chosen as vice president. Also on the executive board, dairy farmer Lee Kinnard of Casco, Wisconsin, was named secretary, and Steve Bodart of Compeer Financial was elected treasurer.

DBA members elected one new corporate representative to the board, Jack Hippen, North America manager for STgenetics; and two new farmer representatives: Kevin Collins of Greenleaf, Wisconsin, and Robert Nagel of Hilbert, Wisconsin.

Brody Stapel, co-owner of Double Dutch Dairy in eastern Wisconsin, was re-elected president of Edge. Jim Winn, a lifelong dairy farmer who co-owns Cottonwood Dairy in southwestern Wisconsin, was re-elected to a three-year term on the Edge board and will

serve as secretary. Holdover board members include Todd Doornink, vice president; and Mitch Davis, treasurer.

Advocate of the year

Dean Strauss of Majestic Crossing Dairy, Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, was named recipient of DBA's Dairy Advocate of the Year Award. Strauss serves on the Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center board; the board of the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; the executive board of Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin; and as chair of the dairy policy committee for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau.

He's a past president of the Professional Dairy Processors of Wisconsin and a former member of the Wisconsin Beef Council board of directors.

PHOTO 1: Author and geopolitical strategist Peter Zeihan predicted China's slowing population growth and New Zealand's ability to produce and export dairy at low costs will have a direct impact on limiting U.S. dairy exports.

PHOTO 2: DBA and Edge members remembered one of their own, John Pagel, with a commemorative milk toast. Two of his children, Jamie Pagel Witcpalek and JJ Pagel, accepted an award in his honor. *Photos courtesy of Dairy Strong.*