

# Darin Von Ruden: The time to act on dairy is now

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The headline of a recent article in The Country Today newspaper pretty accurately summarized forecasts from the Ag Outlook Forum held recently in Madison. The big, bold print stated it point-blank: “Good News Hard to Find.”

The overall theme of the forum? Farmers, especially those in corn and dairy, are entering another year of tight margins in a time when they’ve already critically reduced variable-input spending and as many are encroaching on credit limits with their lenders.

As farmers, we have been through tough times before. Heck, we’re used to those bleak outlook reports from time to time. But something about this stretch feels different. For one thing, we’re entering the third year of severe price dips in the dairy industry and, according to reports at the forum, there don’t seem to be any significant commodity price improvements in the foreseeable future.

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For too long, we’ve been putting a bandage over the gaping wound of outdated pricing systems that are not sustainable and that are no longer serving our farm families. That’s why next week Wisconsin Farmers Union will be bringing farmers together to work toward change.

Ralph Dietrich and Murray Sherk of the Dairy Farmers of Ontario will visit Wisconsin March 13-15 to share their perspective on pros and cons of the Canadian dairy supply management program. Five forums being held around the state will address whether elements of the Canadian system could be incorporated into the U.S. dairy

industry to balance milk supply and demand.

The events are being organized by Wisconsin Farmers Union. DFO President Dietrich, who farms near Mildmay, Ontario, will cover topics like how new farmers get started in a quota-based system, how processors participate and what impact inventory management has had on Canadian dairy prices.

Why is Farmers Union fighting for dairy farming in Wisconsin, when some feel the circumstances can't be changed? Because we believe that your farm matters. We believe that dropping 500 dairy farm families from the land each year is not the path forward. We believe that the future of the Wisconsin dairy way of life is a future worth fighting for.

Clearly, the dairy pricing structure we have here in the United States is not serving family farmers well. These meetings will offer a chance to hear how the Canadian system helps keep prices paid to farmers stable, as opposed to the wild swings and crushingly low prices that have been putting U.S. dairy farmers out of business.

Meeting locations include:

- Tues., March 13, 11:30am-2:30pm, 29 Pines/Sleep Inn & Suites Conference Center, 5872 33rd Ave., Eau Claire.
- Tues., March 13, 7:30pm-9:30pm, Korner Kitchen, W4890 Cty. Rd. H, Edgar.
- Wed., March 14, 11:30am-2:30pm, Holiday Inn Conference Center, 625 Rolling Meadows Dr., Fond du Lac.
- Thurs., March 15, 11:30am-2:30pm, Dodger Bowl Banquet Center, 318 King St., Dodgeville.
- Thurs., March 15, 7:30pm-9:30pm, Nordic Lanes, 511 N. Main St., Westby.

Over 1,000 dairy farmers provided information on the direness of the situation in the dairy industry in WFU's Dairy Producer Survey in 2016. The majority of respondents were receiving a pay price that was below the cost of production. Many of the farmers who responded were interested in big-picture solutions to improve the economics for their own farm and for future generations. Farmers expressed concern that the continuing push for very large dairy expansion was undermining market and price stability. Many were interested in learning more about how supply management would work, but were skeptical that a government-administered program is the right way to go. There was clear interest in a farmer-controlled mechanism.

The stress and difficulty of current dairy economics is considerable, and this pressure is growing.

Over the past year, WFU has shared results of the Dairy Producer Survey with other farmers, community leaders, and legislators. We've communicated specifically with bankers about the dangers posed by oversupply and encouraged them to be part of the solution rather than encouraging even greater dairy expansion.

WFU has also developed a model contract that, if adopted, would provide basic stability and protections to both farmers and processors.

The survey also showed that as farmers, we share a deep concern about the future of our farms and a belief that we are all better off when we have more farms rather than fewer. That starts with working together to assure that our current dairy farms have a fair opportunity to survive and thrive.

Each of the Dairy Together events are free to attend and include a free meal. RSVP to Wisconsin Farmers Union by calling 715-723-5561 or by clicking on the corresponding event at [www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/upcoming-events](http://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/upcoming-events). I hope you'll join me in working together for the future of Wisconsin's dairy farm families.

— Von Ruden is president of the Wisconsin Farmers Union.