

Dairy veterans: flexibility, cooperation key to success

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A trio of dairy industry veterans highlighted flexibility and openness to cooperation as keys to success as they led a virtual panel at a state dairy conference.

A strong, processor-producer relationship helped dairy farmers like Jim Winn and Kevin Souza deal with market changes — such as the popularity of growth hormone-free dairy.

Recombinant bovine somatotropin, or rBST, is a naturally occurring growth hormone in cows to improve health, maintain consistent milk quality and increase milk output. When given to cows as a supplement, rBST can increase those benefits. Both Winn and Souza said they were reluctant to stop using it because it had proven to be profitable.

Now, they're happy with the choice because it helped get their products ahead of the market curve. It also allowed them to sell to other countries, such as Canada, where rBST dairy products are banned.

Souza, who produces milk for Valley Queen Cheese, said farmers sometimes get blinders on and have a hard time seeing past their current practices. But they don't necessarily need any kind of congratulations for their hard work.

"I don't need you to pat me on my back. I just need to know what I'm doing wrong so I can fix it," Souza said at the annual Dairy Strong conference, hosted by the

Dairy Business Association.

Grande Cheese Company conducts farm audits to help farmers understand what areas of their business need improvement. This level of transparency was unheard of when Greg Siegenthaler started in the industry.

“We’re on a journey, and you know in my 30 years in this business, in the early years, we didn’t share a lot. I’m not sure there was a lot of visibility past the driveway,” said Siegenthaler, vice president of milk marketing and supply chain at Grande Cheese Company.

He said anyone who wants to be successful in the dairy industry now needs to have clear transparency and communication between business partners and consumers to succeed. Dairy processors that work closely with milk producers can help farmers gain insight into how to make their products more profitable and make their business models more sustainable.

Winn, who is also chairman of the Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance, said his close relationship with Siegenthaler and Grande has allowed him to focus more on sustainable farming as well as a “night and day” difference in profits from his previous processor.

Winn helped create the Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance to help farmers work together as a community to create more effective practices for environmentally friendly farming.

“Our previous processor could care less about that kind of stuff, but Grande, they get it,” Winn said. “They understand it, they know what the consumer wants, and that’s what separates them from a lot of the processors in our area.”

While some dairy consumers might not care so much about the environmental sustainability of the farms their cheese comes from, Siegenthaler said Grande is working to fill the needs of consumers who do care to boost growth in future business.

“The environmental button’s a hot button,” he said. He added that even though Grande’s pizzeria cheese customer might not necessarily care right now about certain environmental issues, Grande’s cheese products could end up being used by consumers with global influence.

-By Adam Kelnhofer

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