Dairy Farmers’ Priorities—
2008 Michigan Dairy Industry Survey

A recent Michigan State University Dairy Team survey sought input from dairy producers and allied industry professionals on their priorities. Questions addressed industry, research, educational needs, and other issues. This article summarizes the results of the producer survey. Producers placed greatest emphasis on industry issues such as continuation of the Right to Farm program and increasing legislators’ knowledge of agriculture, but also expressed a need for more education on many subjects including getting cows pregnant, using manure as a fertilizer, and profit maximization strategies.

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Last winter, the Michigan State University Dairy Team conducted an industry-wide survey to obtain broad-based stakeholder input to update priorities. Surveys were mailed to 2,237 dairy farmers, 71 herdspersons and management employees, and 171 next-generation family employees associated with Grade A dairy farms in Michigan, as well as 480 allied industry professionals. The survey was developed based on industry discussion groups convened last fall. Questions addressed industry opportunities, needs, and concerns, as well as research and educational needs. Further questions addressed educational information sources and media, along with demographic and business data.

This article summarizes the opinions of 519 dairy farm owners and operators who participated in the survey, their priorities with respect to industry needs and concerns and their perception of key education, training, and research needs. Compared with the 2007-8 Michigan Agricultural statistics, survey participants operate larger farms. Dairy farm operators with herd sizes smaller than 50 cows were less likely to respond to the survey than other groups. Compared with the 2002 Census of Agriculture, more survey respondents were between 45 to 64 years old; fewer respondents fell into the younger age groups (less than 45 years) and also into the oldest age group (65 years or more).

Industry Priorities and Concerns

Dairy farm owners and operators were asked to rate 12 items according to the priority each topic should receive from the Michigan dairy industry. On a scale from 1 (very low priority) to 5 (very high priority), respondents gave the highest priority to the following policy issues with median ratings of 5. A median rating of 5 signifies that at least 50% of the respondents rated this item as a very high priority. All items are ordered according to their average ratings, starting with the highest.

| Ensure continuation of Right to Farm program |
| Increase legislators’ knowledge of agriculture |
| Communicate to consumers about safety of milk products and technologies used |
| Promote the value of the dairy industry in Michigan’s economy |
| Maintain adequate access to water resources for agriculture |

Median ratings of 4, which signify a high priority rating, were reached by the following issues.

| Increase dairy product promotion activities and education, especially targeted to youth |
| Inform the public about current farming practices |
| Work with government to enhance plans to deal with potential foreign animal disease outbreaks |

Dairy farm owners and operators also were asked to rate the importance of 21 items to the viability of Michigan’s dairy industry. On a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), respondents gave high priority to the following 16 issues with median ratings of 4.

| Taking advantage of globalization by increasing dairy exports |
| New dairy products to increase milk utilization |
| Increasing legislators’ understanding of the tradeoff between the cost and benefits of complying with regulations |
| Dairy farmers demonstrating environmental stewardship |
| Improving public understanding of animal welfare |
| Dairy farmer involvement in the legislative process and representation in regulation development |
| Dairy industry being proactive on environmental issues, including working actively with government agencies |
| Methods to improve disease resistance |
| Greater effort and funding for food safety and inspection programs including imported foods |
| Improving production efficiencies |
| Adopting alternative energy technologies |
| Science-based environmental regulations |
| Consumer/public acceptance of scientific information |
| Legal advice on environmental and general agricultural regulations from lawyers specialized in agricultural law |
| Traceability of agricultural products to their origin to improve food safety |
| Methods to process manure, including renewable fuel (e.g., methane digesters) |

Dairy farm owners and operators were then asked to rate their concerns for the dairy industry. A concern is a potential threat to the industry and individual farms. On a scale from 1 (not a concern) to 5 (great concern), one of 13 concerns rated received a median rating of 5.

| Food imports from less regulated countries |

Ten concerns received median ratings of 4, signifying a high need for the industry to address them.
Public image of agriculture
Consumer interpretation of dairy product label, e.g., hormone-free, antibiotic-free, rBST-free
Availability of dairy veterinarians
Farm transfer to the next generation
Successfully eradicating TB in Michigan
Loss of farm land due to urban encroachment
Availability and market/consumers' acceptance of production technologies, e.g., rBST, antibiotics
Planning for and meeting changing state and federal environmental regulations
Farm business growth to improve quality of life
Agro-terrorism and bio-terrorism

Education and Research Needs
In the largest section of the questionnaire, dairy producers were asked about their perception of education, training, and research needs in the areas of environmental management, herd management, farm business management and finance, and human resource management. In considering the survey responses it is important to note that specific groups of farmers may have different research needs and education priorities than reported here as the overall results of the survey. For example, management practices for organic production was of minor interest to survey respondents overall. These are, however, likely to be very important to organic dairy producers (5.5% of the respondents). Another example are human resource management practices, which are of mid-level interest to the average survey participant, but are likely more important to farmers employing a larger number of people.

Herd Management Education and Research Needs. Respondents saw the greatest education and research needs in specific topics of herd management. On a scale from 1 (none) to 5 (a lot), respondents rated 14 out of 26 specific topics with median ratings of 4, indicating significant general needs.

Effective strategies for getting cows pregnant
Fresh cow management
Troubleshooting mastitis and high somatic cell count
Foot health and lameness
Quality, digestibility, and production of feeds
Increasing cow longevity
Lactating cow management
Best management practices for vaccinations
Calf management
Impact of heifer raising methods on performance
Choosing alternative feeds based on feeding value and profitability
Identify bottlenecks to improving herd performance
Reducing the use of antibiotics through best practices
Dry cow management

Environmental Management Education and Research Needs. In the environmental management area, respondents rated 2 out of 6 specific topics with median ratings of 4, indicating significant general needs.

Using manure as a fertilizer
Current regulations and environmental laws

Farm Business Management, Finance, and Human Resource Management Education and Research Needs. In the farm business management and finance (20 topics) and human resource management (16 topics) areas, 5 topics received median ratings of 4, indicating significant general need.

Profit maximization strategies
Financial management skills for dairy farmers
Calculating cost of production
Use of records to improve financial decisions
Planning and financing business transfer to the next generation

The top three human resource management topics received median ratings of 3. Eight more human resource management topics also received median ratings of 3, but lower average ratings.

Communicating with family members involved in the farm
Motivating employees
Ensuring job satisfaction and retention of employees

Conclusions and Implications
The opinions of dairy farm owners and operators regarding the large set of industry issues included in the survey have different implications for different industry groups and decision makers. Collective action may be required on many of the priority and viability items, as well as the industry concerns. Although industry groups will set their priorities based on the values and roles within the industry, farmers’ priorities are an important input into the decision making process. In particular, items with median ratings of 5 have a very high priority for the survey respondents. Considering that survey responses often have a tendency towards mid-level ratings, this is a very strong statement by the participating farmers.

In view of the survey responses, there are numerous education and research opportunities to be addressed. The category receiving high median ratings in the education and research area most frequently was herd management. However, educators will have to consider specific topics carefully when setting priorities. The number of highly rated herd management topics does not indicate that topics in other categories would not be important to the long-term sustainability of dairy farming in Michigan and to the individual success of dairy farm operators.

Education and research needs reported here are based on overall ratings of dairy farm owners and operators on the state level. Differences in educational needs and opinions towards research priorities are to be expected based on farm and operator characteristics, as well as management practices. Additional insights will be gained through further analysis of the survey responses. Results from the survey of the allied industry professionals, next-generation family members, and herdspersons will also be summarized. More survey results will be reported in a future issue of the Michigan Dairy Review.

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