

DAIRY MODERNIZATION

By Kathy Barrett

Use dairy profit discussion groups and dairy profit teams when considering dairy modernization projects

Decision making tools

So you're thinking about doing something different on the farm, maybe updating a parlor, adding an automated feed pusher or getting activity monitors. Whether you're adding new technology or thinking about a larger modernization project, input from other farmers can prove invaluable. Sure you'll talk to vendors and read articles. But talking to a farmer who has either used the technology you're considering or gone through a modernization project gives you a real world perspective that is hard to beat.

Dairy Profit Discussion Groups and Dairy Profit Teams are an excellent way to gather information and experience pertinent to your situation from your fellow dairy producers and agri-service vendors.

Dairy Profit Discussion Groups consist of a small group of producers who meet regularly to share their knowledge and experience with each other. Dairy Profit Teams are focused on just one farm. The farmer decides who will be on the team. It can include the veterinarian, lender, nutritionist, fellow farmer and key people from the farm. Both methods can be extraordinarily useful when thinking about making a change to the farm business.

Dairy Profit Discussion Groups

So what is a Dairy Profit Discussion Group? It's between seven and 20 farmers who have something in common and who meet regularly to discuss their dairies. The commonality might be farm size, production practice, such as organic or grazing, or stage of career, such as young farmers. The key is to have enough in common so discussions are relevant and participants take away ideas they can implement on their dairies. When farmers are implementing new technology, discussion groups are especially valuable. An example of this is a discussion group based on farms switching to robotic milking systems. There aren't a lot of farms with these systems so the opportunity to learn from each other as this system is adopted helps make for a smoother transition.

A skilled facilitator manages the discussion and administration of the group. This person does the legwork to ensure the group has what it needs for fruitful discussions. The groups are small so discussions can be informal and uninhibited. Small groups also allow group members to get to know each other. Farmers report that the professional relationships

they build via the groups are extremely important.

If you are interested in starting a discussion group, a good first step is to contact your local Cornell Cooperative Extension educator or another agri-service person who works with producers and is willing to facilitate the group. Together you can develop a list of farmers you'd like to participate. The next step is to have the facilitator contact these people to gauge their interest. Once the group is identified, set the first meeting date, goals and expectations. The New York Farm Viability Institute has funding available for Dairy Profit Discussion Groups. Contact Kathy Barrett, Cornell PRO-DAIRY Program, by email at kfb3@cornell.edu or by phone at 607.229.4357.

Dairy Profit Teams

Dairy Profit Teams focus on in-depth analysis of an individual farm. The team usually consists of four to six agri-professionals and farmers chosen by the farm owner. Profit teams analyze the farm's operation with an emphasis on problem solving, strategic planning and follow-through. The team facilitator is integral to a Profit Team's effectiveness. The value of a Profit Team when making a change on the dairy, especially a major change, can't be overstated. The analysis and planning that takes place within a well-run team enables the farmer to make well thought-out decisions that meet the farm's goals. Farmers talk individually to their vet, nutritionist and lender about a change they're contemplating. Often they end up with as many opinions as agri-service people. A Profit Team facilitates constructive discussion around these opinions and about the farm business. The farmer ultimately makes the decision but benefits from the collective knowledge.

If you are interested in adding new technology, or embarking on a modernization project, a Profit Team is highly recommended. Start by contacting your Cornell Cooperative Extension educator or an agri-service person who is willing to serve as the facilitator. The New York Farm Viability Institute has funding from New York State that can be used to offset a portion of the cost of a Profit Team. Contact Kristen Cleveland, NYFVI-Profit Team Coordinator, by email at kcleveland@nyfvi.org or phone at 315.453.3823 x103. □