

Building Relationships with Political Leaders Important to all Dairy Farmers

The importance of building relationships with elected officials is more significant now than ever before. The combination of term limits and decreasing numbers in the agriculture industry are making it increasingly important for dairy farmers to make their voices heard. New rules and regulations that impact the agriculture industry make it essential for dairy farmers to develop and maintain an on-going relationship with their legislators.

Over five years ago when constituents in Newaygo County elected a new Representative in their district, the agriculture community felt the need to establish a relationship with their new Representative who had no agriculture background. Spearheaded by Newaygo County MSU Extension, a group of agriculture producers and community leaders began meeting on a regular basis with their new Representative and Senator to discuss issues impacting agriculture. The meetings have developed to the point where the group now meets for breakfast every other month with their elected officials and/or staff members.

The meetings have been beneficial to both the agriculture community and to the elected officials. "We learn exactly what's



Brent and Nancy Wilson (left) explain some of the issues facing the dairy industry to Representative Dave Camp (right).

going on, it gives us insight," says Representative Geoff Hansen (R-Hart), a first term legislator in the Michigan House of Representatives. "I'm pushing it with other legislators on how important it is to have these types of meetings – it is the best thing you can do." Hansen also serves as the Chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee.

"We have a unique situation here, we can talk to our legislators and they know our concerns and we know their concerns," says Frank Konkel, MMPA Advisory Committee member of Hesperia, Mich.

During the meetings, elected officials or their staff members provide an overview on the issues they are currently dealing with, followed by a round table discussion by agriculture producers on the

issues that are impacting them.

The State budget situation was the main topic for discussion at the group's June meet-

ing attended by about 30 people. MSU Extension Director Tom Coon participated in the meeting and discussed the role of MSU Extension and the need to adequately fund MSU Extension.

"We bring the best unbiased research to communities," Coon remarked.

Senator Gerald Van Woerkom (R-Norton Shores), Chairperson of the Senate Agriculture Committee, shared his concern that cities may not understand the role Extension plays for them and encouraged the group to bring that message to them.

"What a great service MSU Extension is to cities as well as the rural area." Van Woerkom remarked.

Other topics discussed at the June meeting included methane digesters, air quality and biodiesel. The meeting provided a good opportunity to discuss pending legislation that would require the use of biodiesel.

"You guys are going to have to tell me what you think about it," Representative Hansen urged. "If we are going to do it we need to make sure we can produce it and make sure we don't put ourselves at a disadvantage to other states."

Several different producers then provided their input on the



Representative Dave Camp answers questions from MMPA members at a recent visit to Brent Wilson's Farm.



Michigan Representative Geoff Hansen and Senator Gerald Van Woerkom (middle) discuss current legislative issues with Newaygo County agricultural producers and community leaders.

role biodiesel plays in their operation.

"As a legislator, I find out a lot from those that come here," Van Woerkom says. "We are able to share with one another and find out what we have in common which helps stimulate legislation and good policy."

The main benefit that Frank Konkell sees in the regular meetings is creating a dialogue and one-on-one conversation. "If the legislator has a question, they know a person who can answer it," he explains.

Konkell's brother-in-law Lance Johnson agrees. "It's better we have input before something becomes law," Johnson remarks. "A lot of farmers don't get involved until something affects them."

In mid-May, MMPA Advisory Committee member Brent Wilson invited Representative Dave Camp (R-Midland, District 4) to his dairy farm in Carson City, Michigan. Other Advisory Committee members in the area and MMPA President Elwood Kirpatrick attended the meeting to share their opinions of various federal legislative issues.

The Central America Free Trade Agreement was discussed at the meeting and the group urged Rep. Camp to support the legislation.

"We feel there is an opportunity for our industry to make up for any losses from the Australia Free Trade Agreement through the passage of CAFTA," Elwood explained to Rep. Camp.

Several other issues were covered with Rep. Camp including Animal ID, BSE, estate taxes,

air quality, rising costs of fertilizer and fuel, milk protein concentrate and the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) Program. Meeting participants urged Rep. Camp to support the extension of the MILC program.

"The MILC Program has worked pretty well and I intend to cosponsor the Peterson bill that calls for its extension," Camp remarked.

These types of meetings and one-on-one contact with legislators are essential to the dairy industry.

Another way to get involved in the political process is to support the Michigan Milk Producers Association Political Action Committee. MMPA delegates reaffirmed

their support of the MMPAC at the March State Annual Meeting by passing a resolution urging members to contribute \$5 per member per month to the MMPAC.

"The MMPAC provides a way for elected officials to identify with our organization and interests," Elwood says.

As Congress and the State Legislature continue to make decisions and pass legislation, it is important for everyone to be involved in this process by providing input and developing relationships with elected officials. If you are interested in legislative involvement, contact the MMPA Member Relations Department at the Novi office for more information.

Check out these Web Sites for Current Policy Issues

www.nmpf.org The link to the Dairy G.R.E.A.T., Grass Roots Education and Action Team site can be found on National Milk Producers Federation's Web site. The site provides a great way to directly connect with your Congressional Representative and Senators through an already formatted e-mail message. To subscribe to the Dairy G.R.E.A.T update, send your e-mail address or fax number to dairygreat@nmpf.org.

http://thomas.loc.gov/ This site is an excellent source of information on federal legislation. It allows you to check the status of pending federal legislation, names of bill cosponsors, committee information, roll call votes, includes links to the U.S. House and Senate Web sites and much more.

www.legislature.mi.gov This site links you to members of the Michigan House and Senate. It also provides a method for searching pending state legislation.

www.house.gov This site provides information on members of the U.S. House of Representatives, committee information, schedules, etc.

www.senate.gov This site provides information on members of the U.S. Senate, committee information, schedules, etc.