



Finding our Footprint

What a year 2008 has been! The election is over, and that means no more campaigning for a couple of months (maybe). MMPA's Ovid plant expansion is finally underway, progressing on time and within budget at this time. Milk prices were good throughout the year but down toward the end. Grain prices were unreal but down now as well. Fuel prices soared but have fallen dramatically from the peak. The general economy, which started the year with question marks while at the same time appearing relatively steady, is now suffering its most serious problems since the Great Depression. I don't know about you, but boring is looking very appealing to me as we leave 2008 and venture on to a new year.

Unfortunately, the crystal ball I'm viewing isn't revealing a boring 2009 for the dairy industry. We have more of the old issues to work on with more emphasis on some than others. One of those will be the carbon footprint of dairy. I think everybody is aware of the global warming issue. Seldom has a day gone by without some reference to it. The United Nations released results of a study indicating 18 percent of greenhouse gases are a result of animal agriculture around the world. True or not, it is data cited frequently.

Many consumers say they are concerned about global warming. A perception exists that they would pay more for food produced in a more "green" manner. Maybe, maybe not, but the perception exists; therefore, some high-profile retailers are promising to sell products with a smaller carbon footprint.

That means reducing the amount of carbon dioxide or its equivalent produced from the farm to the consumer.

It is not my intent to debate the issue of man's contribution to global warming. My position instead is to recognize the issue in the marketplace and explore what the dairy industry can do to lessen any possible negative impact. Maybe there is a way we can all profit from the situation. Dairy Management Inc. (DMI) has taken the lead in managing the issue with full cooperation from the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) and the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA). You've probably read about their actions in the dairy press.

One—and maybe the most important—step to be taken on the producer side will be to accurately establish the carbon footprint of today's dairy farm in the U.S. The United Nations has published a report that establishes such a carbon footprint worldwide; however, we are not comfortable accepting the U.N. report. If we don't accurately establish the carbon footprint, the U.N. report will become the accepted standard.

The process chosen to gather the necessary data is to survey dairy producers. This is not your average survey, nor can it be. You won't be completing it in a five-minute phone conversation or over your morning coffee or latte (80 percent milk). Those of us who have completed draft editions agree that it took us about four hours to complete.

There will be 5,000 surveys mailed covering the entire U.S. All

sizes and types of U.S. dairy farms will receive the survey to insure a statistically significant representation. I think about 100 MMPA members randomly selected will receive surveys, and they will be mailed after January 1.

A well-done survey may be the most important component in managing this issue. We have to take a proactive approach, and I believe we are taking the first steps down that road. Another way to look at the issue is to equate it with energy use. The less energy we use to produce the crops to feed cows, and the more milk we get from each cow, the more we will lower the carbon footprint of a gallon of milk. That should increase our profitability.

Confused? You're thinking we've been managing efficiently throughout our careers in dairy farming, aren't you? You are correct. In the last 60 years or so, we've gone from about 25 million cows producing 120 billion pounds of milk down to 9.2 million cows producing 190 billion pounds of milk, a remarkable story of efficiency and productivity. I think, however, this survey can help us tell the story of our industry's achievements with more clarity. Therefore, please make a New Year's resolution that if you are one of the chosen few, you will take the time to accurately answer and mail the completed survey. This will get our year off to a good start.

Merry Christmas!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.