

by Ken Nobis
President



MMPA's Advocacy Role

I was recently asked the question, "As president of MMPA, is your role to oversee operations, or is it to act as an advocate for dairy?" My answer was that because MMPA is a cooperative, its board of directors takes responsibility for both.

The board doesn't involve itself in everyday operations, but board members do bear the responsibility of monitoring the effectiveness of MMPA staff as operations are carried out. This is a very important role, and nobody on our board takes it lightly. Nor does anyone take lightly the other half of the question: advocacy.

I had never really thought of myself as an advocate for the dairy industry. However, by definition "advocacy" refers to speaking on behalf of another. That means MMPA and other co-ops are major players in the world of advocacy, with board members and officers leading the way.

When MMPA was formed in 1916, the major focus was to obtain a fair price in the marketplace. Individual dairy farmers were at a huge disadvantage compared to processors who held all the cards, so producers united to create an organized force. That concept is still effective today, even though our industry has seen considerable concentration over

the years. Because concentration has occurred in both production and processing, the need for active dairy co-ops to advocate for a fair price is as important today as it was in 1916.

What has changed is the scope of our advocacy. Where initially we were focused solely on price, over time that scope has expanded to include environmental regulations, environmental sustainability, political issues and dairy promotion, just to name a few. Each one can have a major impact on our profitability and on how we manage our farms.

The 2010 U.S. census reported a total population of 313 million with 2 percent claiming to live on farms, but less than 1 percent stating farming as their occupation. Dairy farmers represent a small segment of the 1 percent. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates going back to 1910, the U.S. farm population peaked in 1916 at 32.5 million, which represented 32 percent of the total population of 101.6 million. With one-third of our nation's population still on farms in 1916 at the peak, the other two-thirds weren't as far removed from the farm as they are today.

The change in population demographics is one factor that has made it necessary for MMPA to increase its role educating regulators, legislators, educators, allied industries and the general population. We are meeting the challenge in many different ways today. For example, on the

political front we work as a part of Agricultural Leaders of Michigan (ALM) with other commodity groups to provide seminars for our U.S. Congressional representatives about the status of our industries. Transportation, crop chemical, fertilizer, seed genetics and others are also included to make the case for the total impact agriculture has on the economy.

MMPA is a regular participant in monthly Lansing Agricultural Club breakfast meetings. These meetings provide the opportunity for many varied components of the agricultural sector to interact, not only with each other, but also with legislators and regulators. Meeting on a regular basis gives participants an opportunity to become friends and learn more about the role they each play in the overall scheme of food production.

I have heard (and have said myself) many times "so-and-so" just doesn't understand our industry. This happens partly because we have not always done our part to disseminate the information that would clarify our position. We can't depend on anyone but ourselves to advocate for our industry. MMPA is constantly looking for innovative ways to carry out this obligation. Especially in today's complex world, advocacy plays a major part in our effort to "market our members' milk to the greatest advantage possible" in fulfillment of MMPA's mission.

Ken