The Importance of Dairy Farmers

It has been my custom for the past 15 years to dedicate at least one June column to dairy farmers. This year, I want to do the same but use a past article and compare its contents to where we are today. So, this week, we look back ten years, almost to the day June 13, 2015 with comments about where we are on June 14, 2025.

“June is National Dairy Month and so it is a fitting time to remember all the contributions that dairy farms make to everyone. Of course, we all get milk to drink, cheese to snack on and ice cream to savor, but it may also surprise you how important dairy farming is to our local economy.

According to the Virginia Farm Bureau, a farmer spends about 70% of their gross income within a 20 mile radius of the farm. VAFB also shares that for every dollar a farmer earns, $5-7 circulates through the local economy. One thing that makes dairy farming stand out on these two points are: 1. Dairying is confining. The convenience of buying close to home is a dividend to most dairy producers; and 2. Dairying takes a great deal more machinery and facilities than other forms of livestock farming, so they spend more not only with dealerships but also with maintenance companies as well. “

**In 2025, this remains true but we have seen a continued slide in the overall number of farms until we are seeing a real impact on the number of agri-businesses we have left to supply us, dairying or not.**

“Thus far, 2015 has not been a very good year for dairy producers. Prices paid to farmers have dropped 45% since last spring. While the income stream has dwindled, expenses have maintained their levels or increased slightly. This latest round of low prices have many producers gauging their willingness to remain in business.”

**As noted above, many have chosen to exit the dairy business. As of year-end 2024, Class III and IV milk prices are projected to be steady to a bit lower by the second half of 2025. Feed costs are similarly consistent, with the resulting margin trending lower but remaining above historic average.**

“The consolidation of the dairy industry’s supply side is nothing new. In 1950, there were 13,500 farms that sold milk in the State of Virginia. Today, only 620 remain; 157 call the counties of the Ninth Congressional District home.”

**In 2025, only 360 dairy farms remain in VA. In our area, Wythe and Franklin Counties have the most remaining. In Smyth County, we have one year-round dairy farm and a few seasonal dairies left. In 1978, we had 168!**

“The average size of the herds have increased as well. When I graduated from VA Tech in 1985, the average dairy herd in Virginia was under 100 cows, today the average herd is 182 cows. Overall cow numbers have dropped as well. In 2004, there were 105,000 cows in Virginia; today only 93,000 remain, a nearly 11.5% decrease.”

**We actually added a few cows, but with few herds to spread them over, the average sized dairy herd in Virginia has ballooned to nearly 340 head per herd.**

“Despite the downturn in numbers of farms and cattle, the overall total milk production in the state has maintained itself. This has been largely due to research done on barn designs that contribute to animal care and comfort. Improvements in stall lengths, bedding material, heat dissipation, and sight obstruction removal have led to cows spending more time lounging than in the past. This is important because when a cow lays down, her blood flow increases 30%. During the course of a day, a cow will pump between 3-4000 gallons of blood through their udder to produce milk and the more blood flow, the more milk is produced. Therefore getting cows off their feet to rest helps increase milk production.”

**We make about 1.4 billion pounds of milk per year now or almost 170 million gallons.**

“According to the dairy budgets produced through the VA Tech Dairy Science Department and the Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, the average dairy farm spends over $800,000 per year to remain in operation. This figure does not include any debt service. Milk prices paid to farmers are not in the same units as consumers might see in the store. Milk in the store is sold in units of volume…gallon, half-gallon, pint and so on. Farm prices are based on weight, in particular 100 pound weight increments called hundredweights or cwt. Milk weighs 8.6 pounds per gallon so one cwt is equivalent to 11.62 gallons.”

**We do not have the specialists at VA Tech to confirm of deny the number given here about ecxomonic impacts but my guess is that it is buried and dead.**

The next time you open your refrigerator or pass by the dairy case in your favorite grocery store, think of the hard working men and women who are dedicated to help feed our nation. Happy June Dairy Month!

**Still true. Tell ‘em Bear and Andy sent you!**

Upcoming Events

June 12-14 OGATA Summer Show, 908 Hillman Hwy, Abingdon VA

June 23 Deadline to consign VQA calves to Aug sale

June 24-28 VA 4-H Congress, Blacksburg

July 7-10 Forestry PD for Teachers, Bill Worrell (bworrell@vt.edu)

July 7-11 Smyth County 4-H Camp

July 8 VQA Sale

July 14 VQA Steer Take-Up

July 16 VQA Heifer Take-Up (depending on numbers…. Could be a one-day take-up)

July 21-23 Virginia Beef Cattle University, The Inn, VA Tech Campus

July 29 Youth Day at Rich Valley Fair… stay tuned for more information

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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