

# Diagnostic Team Approach to Enhancing Dairy Farm Sustainability, Phase II

## Final Report for ENE98-040

Project Type: Professional Development Program

Funds awarded in 1998: \$50,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2001

Region: Northeast

State: Pennsylvania

Project Leader:

[C. William Heald](#)

The Pennsylvania State University

## Project Information

### Summary:

Dairy Advisory Teams improve farm management success using current key advisors. Teams consider individual farm values, objectives, and constraints before identifying critical opportunities to improve business success. Teams are selected from people with skills and abilities that complement farm goals. A non-farm advisor organizes and runs the team meeting in consultation with the owner. Team meetings are short, focused, and regular. Teams select action plans that are critical to success. Regular team meetings increase the ability of farm advisors to monitor and make midcourse adjustment to farm plans. Farm owners make all decisions while benefiting from the advice given.

### Project Objectives:

- Demonstrate farm advisory teams for critical problem solving to more communities using partially compensated local coordinators.  
Improve team members' skills in problem solving, critical thinking and integrated farm systems planning.  
Evaluate the impact of diagnostic teams and revise training materials.  
Disseminate information about effectiveness of diagnostic teams through field days, pasture walks, discussion groups, and educational conferences.  
Assist team members in forming new teams after the completion of the one-year experience.

## Cooperators

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## Educational Approach

Educational approach:

### Publications/Outreach

Information from the project has been disseminated in many ways both to producers and agribusiness consultants. The agribusiness informational workshop has been offered each fall (1997-2001) to consultants and the team kick-off workshop has been offered to producers and their consultants each spring (1998-2001). The concept has been published in numerous statewide and national publications including: Hoard's Dairyman, Northeast Dairy Business, Dairy Herd Management, Lancaster Farming, Farmshine, Dairy Digest, AgChoice Farm Credit Leader, Penn State Herd Health Memo, and Country Folks. Other outreach tools and activities include: Dairy Advisory Team Newsletter, Website, CD-ROM, Program Leader Handbook, Producer handbook, and Skills for Successful Teams Conference and Proceedings.

No milestones

## Performance Target Outcomes

### Outcomes

Project leaders measured the impact teams have on the industry from four years (1997-2000) of producer and consultant advisory team project data. Agribusiness consultants were surveyed and producers were given a project completion evaluation at the end of their project year. Project data

from 2000-2001 will be added to the summary when teams are surveyed in 2002.

#### Agribusiness Survey Summary

In a survey of farm advisors active on dairy advisory teams in the last 4 years, 76% responded yes to the question, "Did working with teams help you to achieve any of your own professional goals?" While 92% responded favorably to the question, "Did the team help you to learn about areas of expertise besides your own?" "Working with teams influenced [positively] how they work with clients without teams," said 61%. Eighty-seven percent were "Somewhat to very satisfied with achievement of team goals" and 90% said they "Would continue to work with teams." From their experience, 63% selected 3 to 6 members as the better team size and the most popular expertise needed by advisory teams was finance (94%), nutrition (93%), and health (86%).

#### Producer Evaluation Summary

Of the producers who had active dairy advisory teams over the last four years, 58% answered that they would continue to meet after the project end. Areas of improvement that were most often targeted were: decreasing SCC (75%), increasing milk production (56%), improving cash flow (54%), planning for future business improvements (67%), decreasing feed cost/cwt. milk (47%), and developing a record keeping system (28%). Producers changed their use of businesses techniques from before to after starting their advisory teams: Setting written goals was important (7% before and 38% after), evaluating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & threats (7% and 55%), communicating regularly with agribusiness (16% and 63%), regularly monitoring production parameters (35% and 85%), regularly monitoring financial parameters (38% and 51%) and working with an advisory team (2% and 55%).

## Project Outcomes

The project team met all five of the objectives set forth when the project was approved.

The dairy advisory team concept is now well developed and accepted across the state and region (MD, NJ, OH, VA). The extension leadership team has reached more than 100 farmers and 300+ consultants through this project. Many have come back repeatedly for additional training or assistance. The consultants involved have gone out and continued the spread of the advisory team concept with other clients independent from the project. Several consultants have made advisory teams part of their business offerings. Nine out of ten experienced farm advisors plan to continue using advisory teams in the future.

Producers along with their team members had many opportunities to improve their skills in forming, leading and working in teams in workshop settings, quarterly meetings for coordinators, and the "Skills for Successful Teams" conference held in October 2001. Project leaders were able to revise training materials and methods on a yearly basis from the data obtained from two survey types - producer and consultant. In addition to the dissemination methods listed below (Publications and Outreach), project leaders have assisted educators in New Jersey, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia and Iowa. Project leaders

gave two national workshops and two international presentations in Australia and Portugal. The concept will be presented to approximately 400 dairy producers in Toronto, Ont. in January 2002.

## Potential Contributions

Producers and consultants alike have been willing to share much information about their teams and businesses. From this data, it was found that advisory teams made a significant impact across the state and many more producers need to incorporate the advisory team concept into their businesses. The team coordinators have been extremely dedicated and have exhibited the willingness to be trained and to lead others in the dairy industry.

To celebrate the last year of the project, two one-day capstone conferences were held called "Skills for Successful Teams." Conference participants attended one day of hands-on, interactive workshops designed to enhance their skills in forming, leading, and working with teams.

Two articles for peer review journals are being written. A handbook for producers is in its final stages of editing by a national farm magazine. The handbook will teach others how to form and maintain an advisory team for their agribusiness. The Dairy Advisory Team web site <http://dat.das.psu.edu> is also being updated and will be completed by January 2002. In addition, the Penn State Dairy Alliance Initiative and the Department of Veterinary Science will carry forward the dairy advisory team concept in their Demonstration Farm and Milk Quality Assurance Programs.

## Future Recommendations

The demonstration and refinement of the dairy advisory team concept has been successfully carried out in the state and is spreading across the region. Nine out of ten advisors with dairy advisory team experience plan to continue with current farms or start additional advisory teams. Farmers not familiar with the project's success generally resist the cost of having advisory teams and sharing their business data with consultants. With the prevailing attitudes, consultants met resistance to charging for professional time spent serving on advisory teams. As a result, they restrict how many teams they participate in pro bono or with reduced professional charges. The success of the current farm advisory teams is slowly changing this perception as word spreads. Research to better understand producer's resistance to forming advisory teams could aid wider and faster adoption of the team concept. Teaching advanced skills to team facilitators would increase their effectiveness and value.

As more producers perceive value and pay for consultant's time the concept will flourish. The advisory team concept is valid for other agribusinesses and should be demonstrated there. The concept will continue to be advocated in Pennsylvania within other educational activities such as the Dairy Alliance and Milk Quality programs.



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