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CENTER FOR INTEGRATED AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS / UW-MADISON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL AND LIFE SCIENCES

Research Brief

#37 Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers

Wisconsin has suffered dramatic losses in numbers of dairy farms. While the decrease in part includes large numbers of retiring dairy farmers, the lack of young people entering dairy farming is an even more significant factor in the decline. To reverse that trend a creative approach is needed to make dairy farming more attractive.

The Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers (WSBDF) aims to get more young people into dairy farming in Wisconsin by providing training in dairy farming using management intensive rotational grazing (MIRG). WSBDF is the only school of its type in the nation, and is administered by the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS). The career paths and training opportunities for New Zealand dairy farmers provides one model for the school. Adapting this training model to a program has been a challenge and a learning experience for the school's staff and committee, and the program is continuously evolving to meet the demands of Wisconsin's farming realities.

THESE STUDENTS NEED A STRONG COMBINATION OF DAIRY INFORMATION, GRAZING KNOWLEDGE, AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS.—DICK CATES

First steps

In 1995, Steve Stevenson, CIAS associate director, and Russ O'Harrow, a retired Wisconsin dairy farmer and former CIAS advisor, traveled to New Zealand. They found that carefully institutionalized farmer career paths in New Zealand help young people of all backgrounds enter dairy farming (see *Research Briefs* 26, 33, and 34 and the report *Dairy Farmer Career Paths*, all available from the address at the bottom of page 2). An important part of that early career trajectory in New Zealand is specialized, early-career training that includes both classroom and on-farm work.

MIRG plays an important role in helping young farmers get started in New Zealand. "New Zealand dairy production systems interested us. Our impression was that the low-purchased-input and low-capital nature of these systems helps get energetic, committed young people into dairy farming," says Stevenson.

In addition, dairy graziers and UW extension faculty approached CIAS about providing training in grass-based dairying. In 1995, CIAS secured a grant from the USDA-sponsored Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program to begin operation of WSBDF in cooperation with the UW-Madison Farm and Industry Short Course in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

WSBDF originally required attendance at the 16-week Farm and Industry Short Course, participation at a weekly grazing seminar, and completion of an internship. The school now offers flexible attendance options and additional alternatives, like one-day workshops. The school also gives students a chance to meet dairy graziers and assistance in identifying farming opportunities.

Training objectives

Stevenson and O'Harrow identified recruitment and training of new dairy farmers as a key challenge facing Wisconsin, and an area where New Zealand's example would be instructive. They identified four training and recruitment objectives. Comparing the WSBDF to these objectives helps point out the fit between the New Zealand dairy training model and Wisconsin realities.

❖ *Objective 1: Identify strategies for recruiting beginning dairy farmers from non-farm as well as farm backgrounds.*

According to *Dairy Farmer Career Paths*, in New Zealand, approximately one-third of all entering dairy farmers came from non-farm backgrounds in 1995. In Wisconsin in that year, less than five percent came from non-farm backgrounds. Attracting people from a variety of backgrounds can strengthen successful entry, energy level, and openness to new ideas in the dairy industry.

WSBDF sends recruitment information to county extension faculty, farm press, high school agriculture teachers, vocational agriculture schools, and farmer grazing networks. Students come from farm and non-farm backgrounds. While Dick Cates, the school's coordinator, feels that WSBDF has something to offer people from farms, it holds special promise for those who don't come from a farm. "These students need a strong combination of dairy information, grazing knowledge, and management skills," says Cates. And while most students have dairy farm experience, few have farm *management* experience.

WSBDF students' ages (18 to 35) and amounts of formal education vary widely. Both men and women attend the program. Students come from Wisconsin as well as outside the state. One recent graduate had previously worked as a computer programmer; another had been a construction worker.

While recruiting diverse students has been successful, student numbers have been lower than hoped. Low student numbers may reflect that those in positions to pass WSBDF information on to potential students are not doing so, or that the school's requirements did not meet students' needs. Cates hopes raising the school's visibility and offering flexible attendance options, like distance learning, will attract more students.

❖ *Objective 2: Use training approaches that creatively combine the theoretical and the practical, and make effective use of farmer mentors and on-farm internships.*

In New Zealand, dairy farmer training programs move from classroom to on-farm learning and are management-oriented. Dairy farm "cadets," or apprentices, serve under carefully selected farmer mentors.

Wisconsin's Farm and Industry Short Course classes offer theoretical and practical training in dairy farming. The weekly grazing seminar allows farmers and others with grazing expertise to co-teach all aspects of developing a grass-based dairy. Students go to pasture walks to see grazing in practice, to ask questions, and to learn about a variety of grazing approaches. They also attend conferences, gaining practical knowledge from the sessions, and making important connections.

After their coursework, students can complete two-month internships on two different Wisconsin dairy farms using MIRG. A careful process matches students and farmer mentors. Internships run from April to May and from June to July, so interns reach seasonal or semi-seasonal dairies at the thick of the calving season. They get lots of experience—fast—with managing grass and cattle.

❖ *Objective 3: Provide programs that help beginning farmers receive academic certification and earn income from meaningful farm jobs and apprenticeships.*

In the New Zealand training scheme, several levels of certification are available to students. National certificates in farm practice and farm business management tie directly to positions of increasing responsibility.

In Wisconsin, meaningful certification is critical to those wishing to farm without family assistance or a farming background. WSBDF mentors provide letters of recommendation for interns working on their farms. Cates will also provide a letter of recommendation upon student request, and students receive a graduation certificate. "Bankers take the WSBDF credentials seriously," adds Cates, "as do farm employers. About 80 percent of our graduates are farming, and about one-quarter of those are on their own farm."

❖ *Objective 4: Build organizational capacity to oversee ongoing training and employment pathways as is done in New Zealand.*

In New Zealand, dairy cadets follow a structured path defined by the government, training centers, and the dairy industry, similar to students choosing other trades. Field officers monitor and guide dairy students' progress through the New Zealand dairy career ladder. Field officers' responsibilities include arranging job interviews and reviewing farmer trainers.

Cates provides help for WSBDF students in ways similar to New Zealand field officers. He speaks as a reference for students looking for a farm to rent or for a cattle loan and helps them evaluate a farm or situation when asked. "When they have the confidence and knowledge to start contacting others who can help them, they are on their way to managing their own farm," Cates observes. But Wisconsin does not have a standard organizational structure for training and employing dairy farmers. Apprenticeship and sharemilking opportunities are scarce. "Most grazing farms are simply not large enough yet to employ someone year-round," says Cates.

WSBDF graduates can find meaningful farm employment hard to come by, particularly if they are without a family farm, an established employment situation to return to, or enough equity to get a loan for cattle. Such students may work on an expanding conventional dairy, even if their goal is to develop their own grass-based dairy.

Program evolution

WSBDF carries out the four objectives for dairy training with varying success, depending on how well Wisconsin's dairy realities match the New Zealand model. Dairy graziers have been eager to speak at the grazing seminar and serve as mentors. Students report that they have learned a lot from the internships. Student recruitment and post-graduation employment are weaker areas.

The school is clearly unique in how it defines and fills a niche that other educational programs have missed. One of the successes of the school is that it has attracted interest from people who want to give something back to Wisconsin agriculture. Many different levels of support are available to those who wish to make a financial contribution to the school. Cates notes, "Interest in this opportunity to invest in the future of grass-based dairying in Wisconsin is strong, and is crucial to the future success of the program."

For information about the school, contact CIAS using the information below.

The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) brings together university faculty, farmers, policy makers, and others to study relationships between farming practices, farm profitability, the environment, and rural vitality. Located at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it fosters multidisciplinary inquiry and supports a range of research, curriculum development, and program development projects. For more information on the center or on the research in this brief, contact:

CIAS, 1450 Linden Dr., UW-Madison, Madison, WI 53706. **Phone:** (608) 262-5200 **Fax:** (608) 265-3020 **Internet:** mgs@aae.wisc.edu **Web:** http://www.wisc.edu/cias

This research brief is part of a series. Contact CIAS for other titles. CIAS staff members are grateful for the reviews of this research update by UW-Madison and UW-Extension faculty and CIAS Citizens Advisory Council members. Printed on recycled paper. January, 1999.