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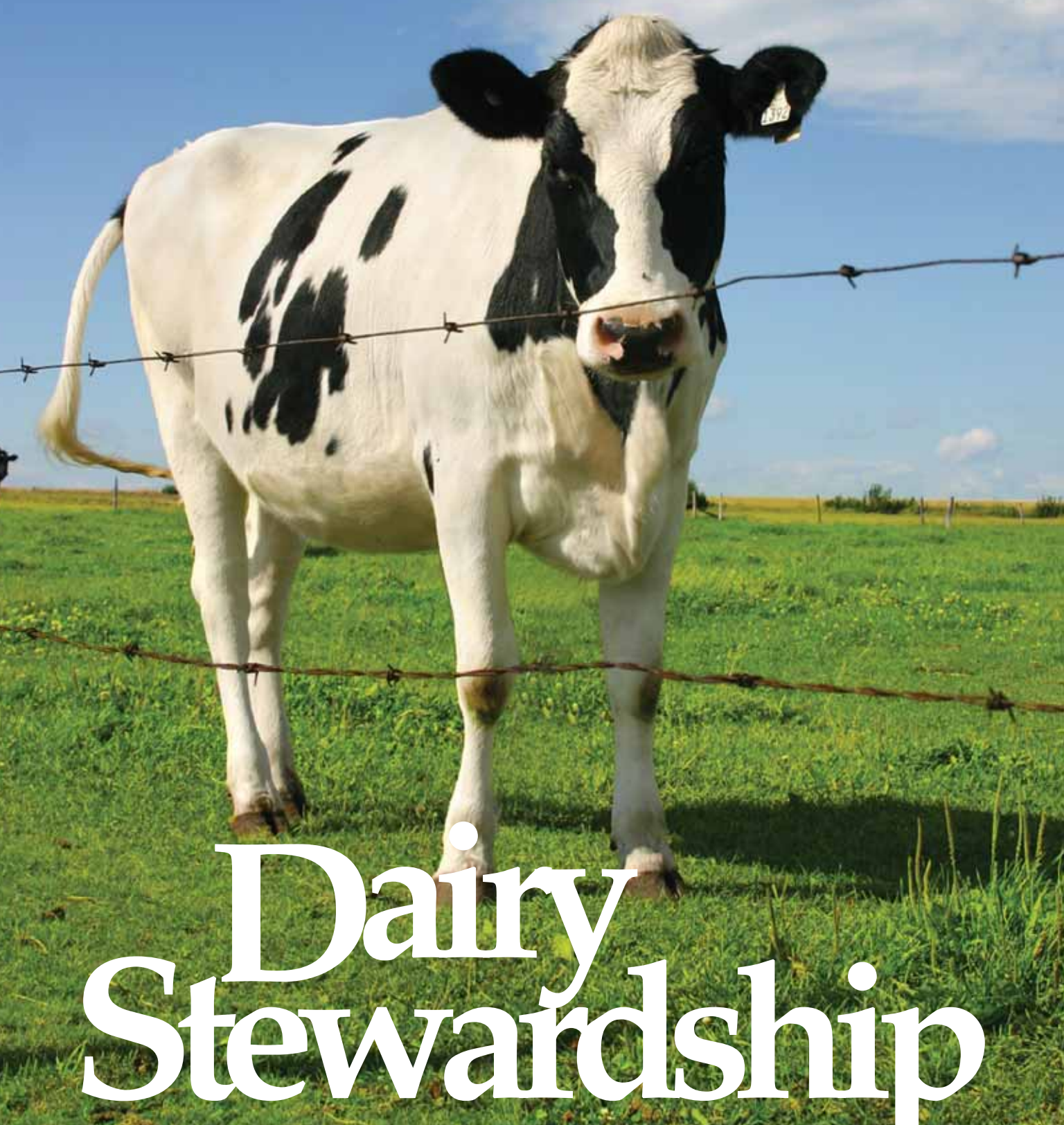
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Dairy Stewardship

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Dairy Stewardship

A five-year-old project to help members of a Vermont dairy cooperative achieve greater sustainability in their operations is now ready to go regional.

By Gary DiGiuseppe

The Dairy Stewardship Alliance was launched in 2003 by the famed, environmentally-inclined ice cream makers Ben & Jerry's, along with the 520-member St. Albans Cooperative Creamery and the University of Vermont's Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Allen Matthews of the Center explains, "It was a research project when we started, to look at how to actually identify issues on the farm that the farmers needed some additional information on; that information could come back to Extension professionals, and they could put their training programs together."

But there was another purpose; to help the farmers self-assess their own sustainable practices, and to compare those assessments to those of other producers. "They give themselves a ranking in each of the different module areas,"

Matthews explains, "and then they send that in. We've put all that information in a database, and then they get a report back, and the report says, 'Here's how you graded yourself in all these areas.' They get a chart that shows what their score is, but then they also get a chart that shows how everybody else that's done it have scored themselves, and so they get to compare what their practices are with the other folks."

The modules are in areas ranging from the environment (soil health, water management, nutrient management, and biodiversity) to herd maintenance (animal husbandry, pest management, and farm financials), to social consciousness and conservation of resources (energy and community health). Each is broken down further into a number of topics; in "biodiversity," for instance, the farmer grades him or herself on genetic diversity of crops, management of riparian areas and of adjacent areas, crop field

management and other topics.

The Alliance doesn't weight the modules by trying to assess their relative importance, but it does try to standardize the information in each. For "soil management," as an example, Matthews says one of the topics is soil tests; they look at whether the participant conducts soil tests and how often, and whether the results are being used. The same goes for all the other modules and the topics within them. "We're looking at the whole farm," he says, "not just one aspect of it."

After the participants get the results comparing them with other farmers, Matthews says they look for places to make improvement. "We provide some educational sessions on energy efficiencies, or water quality, or nutrient management practices, and then a year later they do the assessment again, and see what their changes have been, and how they now compare with everybody." He says it's been interesting: "The farmers are brutally honest with their own assessment of themselves, so they really don't rank themselves high-

ly in an area where they're not following through on a practice."

The Alliance got started at the same time Vermont's Agency of Agriculture was pursuing something similar; the Agency was using guidelines from the US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop Best Management Practices for dairy farms that would ultimately have the force of law behind them. Matthews says, "They needed a way to get this information out in a practical way to farmers. Ben & Jerry's is interested in stewardship and sustainability, and so they were a natural partner, and St. Albans Coop provides the milk for Ben & Jerry's ice cream. So, that was the connection."

The Alliance defines "sustainable dairy farming practices" as those which "enhance the natural environment and herd health while supporting profitability and improving the quality of life for farmers, their families and their communities." As Matthews points out, "You're not going to be sustainable unless your farm's in business." The program is not targeted toward farms of a specific size; Matthews says one of the most active

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participants milks 550 cows and is looking at installing robotic milkers, while another is a 75-head, grass-fed operation. Nor is it geared toward organic producers; the first farms in the Alliance, he says, were members of the Young Cooperators, a group of conventional confinement operations that are all at least second-generation. Matthews says, "They were the group that actually helped us look at the self-assessment modules, added the modules so that they were practical for farmers to read, and challenged some of the assumptions that were in it."

The next step is to get more farmers involved. Only 10% of the St. Albans members participated in the research; Matthews says, "The idea is to try to now take the model and make it available on line, so that if a farmer is interested, they can complete the self-assessment, hit a 'Submit' button, and then they would get an actual report back that would show how their practices were related to other farms in the Northeast."

The Alliance is partnering with a similar project in the Netherlands that also has a Ben & Jerry's connection; the ice cream brand is owned by the Anglo-Dutch consumer products company Unilever, and eleven Dutch farms that were supplying the milk for Ben & Jerry's in Europe formed their own module-driven project, dubbed "Caring Dairy." Those indicators have in turn been adopted by a 500-member cooperative, CONO Coop, which is using them as part of a continuous quality improvement program for their members. Matthews says the farmers who sign up for the program get a 50-euro incentive bonus per 100 kg,

roughly 50 cents/cwt; 92% of the CONO farmers have signed up, he says, adding "I'm expecting that that's the kind of thing that's going to happen here, too." Matthews is also hop-

ing sustainability can translate into direct cash benefits to producers through the fledgling carbon sequestration market. There is already a Chicago Climate Exchange, where "pollution credits" are traded. Farmers who trap carbon with grass, crops and trees can sell the right to claim that carbon to industry. The Alliance is working with two Vermont companies, the Sustainable Food Laboratory and The Earth Partners, on using the measurements and metrics from their modules to calculate the amount of carbon their cooperators can claim. "I don't want anybody to feel like they were going to do this just to go through the motions; that they're really going to be able to get something out of it," Matthews says. "And that's why I'm really excited about this other next phase; it's what we're calling 'low-carbon farming,' and trying to put this whole world of carbon sequestration into a language that farmers can understand, and can actually benefit from."

But Matthews says the savings from the Alliance's project are already tangible. "Most of the farmers that I know," he says, "are already good stewards of the land, and they know by investing in the sustainability of their farm, it's not just an economic line, it really is the environmental health of the soil and the water quality for them and their neighbors...I guess the sustainability is trying to help to look beyond the fluctuating price of milk; how can you reduce your off-farm inputs, so you aren't so vulnerable?"

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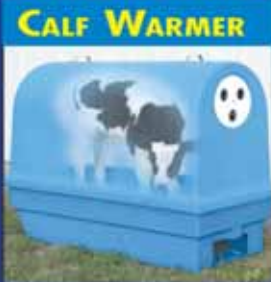
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