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Wayne County Hosts Dairy Farmers for Historic Talk of Future

With more than a dozen local dairy farmers at the table, an agricultural economist discussed ways the county can start taking command of its own destiny.

HONESDALE (June 28, 2018) – “Let’s not talk about what we can’t change,” Wayne County Commissioner Brian Smith said Wednesday afternoon in summing up an historic meeting with a group of local dairy farmers.

For decades, milk producers in Wayne County and around the country, have been operating at a loss – it costs more to run their farms than they can make selling their milk. As a result, the county’s 1,200 active dairy farms now number fewer than 50.



Not willing to let this iconic industry, which has played such a pivotal role in Wayne County’s culture and heritage, fade out of existence, the Commissioners launched an initiative some five years ago to address the challenges facing agriculture and other sectors of the economy – called Wayne Tomorrow!

Wayne Tomorrow Agriculture Work Group Co-Chair Robert Muller explained that from the earliest stages, the committee targeted dairy – along with meat producers, vegetable & fruit

growers, etc. – as requiring attention.

“We knew we needed to do something, but things are so complicated when you talk about dairy,” Muller said. The federal government uses a complex and often counter-intuitive method of calculating the price per hundredweight paid to milk producers in this part of the country.

Now Wayne County has hired a consultant to create an Economic Development Plan for Agriculture, and the effort is being funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission, thanks in large part to the groundwork already laid by Wayne Tomorrow.

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'TAKING THE BULL BY THE HORNS'

The process started with Consultant and Agricultural Economist Phillip Gottwals conducting interviews with farmers of all types, and it was the dairy farmers themselves who asked for a meeting to learn more about the “opportunities” Gottwals says are available to help the local dairy industry take their future into their own hands.

“This was the first meeting, probably ever, that we (the dairy farmers) are not trying to change the national policy,” Commissioner Smith said. “We’re not begging our representatives to save our farms. We are talking about doing something for ourselves.” A fact that was not lost on the 15 dairy farmers who attended the focus group meeting Wednesday, he noted.

Smith said the farmers talked about taking a greater role in their future and not just being relegated to producing a commodity as part of a giant food chain.

The problem remains, however, that the dairies have been operating at a loss for years and that makes it difficult to attract the next generation to the farm. A situation that will likely continue, according to Smith, who said the Farm Bill currently being discussed in the US Senate doesn’t address two key concerns: the need for a national milk supply management system; and bringing the price for milk in line with the real costs of producing it.

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

Engaging the next generation in the future of all facets of agriculture is a critical element to ensuring continuity as more and more farmers reach retirement age. With the encouragement of Wayne Tomorrow, the local schools, especially Wayne Highlands, have embraced this effort.

The school district re-established the agricultural sciences curriculum and hired a full-time instructor, Kayla Hack, who just completed her first year with 100 students participating. Still more are prepared to enter the program in the 2018-19 school year.

While Smith said many of the older farmers say they don’t want their children getting into farming, the youngsters have overwhelmingly said they want to stay, and they want to play a larger role in its future development.

“We have a lot of bright, young people who want to be involved (in agriculture) but we need an economically sustainable environment for them to work in,” Smith explained

Hack, who also attended the post-session briefing, said the students have a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and they are challenging her to provide the education and resources they are interested in to help move



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the agriculture industry forward. “The need is for jobs, and the classroom should reflect what is happening in the community,” she said. “It all goes together.”

Consultant Phillip Gottwals said “We don’t see this level of youth engagement anywhere else we work. It gives us a lot of confidence in what can be achieved here.” Gottwals’ firm, Agricultural Consulting Services Inc. specializes in working on agriculture and food system revitalization projects in the United State and abroad. Gottwals said for the most part these are rural, resource-based economies in transition.

FARMERS AS ENTREPRENEURS

Wayne County dairy farmers, in particular those whose families have invested generations in their farms, rarely see themselves as entrepreneurs – “but that’s exactly what they are,” Smith explained, small business owners who need to figure out how to make it all work in order to be successful.

ACS also works with urban food systems, which is where Gottwals says he can see some important niche markets that could help local farmers take control of their own destiny. Along with analyzing dairy consumption habits in the immediate seven-county region, ACS will also be looking into niche opportunities in the large population areas to the east and south – particularly New York City and northern New Jersey.

Gottwals said these areas are home to a large Hispanic population that has different tastes in dairy products, often preferring milk with a higher fat content and somewhat sweeter to the palate. Now, he said, the conversation must move from theory to action.

Creating a future in which Wayne County’s dairy farms and farm families can thrive will take a lot of work, but it can happen. “There are a lot of people pulling on the rope in the same direction,” Smith said, “along with the (PA) Department of Agriculture.”

The Department, and Secretary Russell Redding in particular, has taken a keen interest in Wayne Tomorrow’s efforts and is watching its progress closely as they try to address the challenges facing the industry across the Commonwealth.

Next, Gottwals and the Wayne Tomorrow Agriculture Work Group will be hosting a focus group for the county’s meat producers.

