

## Students from everywhere gain 'large herd' management training

# Beyond the universities, there's the Dairy Consortium

By **SHERRY BUNTING**  
Special for Farmshine

TEXICO, N.M. -- They came from 16 U.S. land grant universities, as well as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, to the Texas, New Mexico, Arizona tri-state region that is the third largest milkshed in the country, producing 11% of the U.S. milk with 10% of the nation's cows. They are studying for careers that range from dairy herd management, nutrition, education and food science to future veterinarians.

The list of applicants grows each year for the U.S. Dairy Education and Training Consortium (formerly known as the Southern Great Plains Dairy Education Consortium and as Dairy Consortium for short), which has been providing "large herd" theory and management training since 2007, when New Mexico State University, Texas A&M and the University of Arizona all gave up their dairy facilities.

Over its seven years, the Dairy Consortium has graduated now 270 students and the post-program surveys show the students rank the experiences as one of the best in their college careers.

"We're in the third largest milkshed in the nation and there are no university dairies here, so we began to look at how to raise up the next generation of dairy farmers and allied industry people," said Robert Haagevort, Ph.D., extension dairy specialist at the NMSU Ag Science Center-Clovis. Haagevort coordinates the Dairy Consortium, which has grown as its name suggests from training students in the Southwest to bringing together students from across the country and beyond.

"We bring the students here and bring the best professors here and show them how it's done," he added. "For our pre-vet students, we show them what our industry is about. In some cases, this experience helps the students determine what they see themselves doing after graduation. Those going back to farms or into dairy herd management can replicate what they learn here,

elsewhere. The housing systems may differ, but we teach them a blueprint for large-herd management. In essence, we are reinventing the land grant mission in bringing the production ag focus to these students."

The 2014 class of 50 selected students has grown from 18 in its first year. The 2014 class included a fairly equal distribution of juniors and seniors expecting to graduate in the next 2 years to go on toward careers in industry, education, farm management, and to a larger degree future veterinarians as well as to a smaller

degree students interested in careers in dairy education, food science, and dairy processing.

Alexandria Brown, for example, noted she came to the Dairy Consortium with no dairy background, but was exposed to agriculture in high school through FFA. Figuring she wanted to become a veterinarian, she "fell in love with cattle" during her undergraduate vet-prep studies at the University of Idaho. Back in her hometown of Portland, Oregon, she sees the interest from consumers wanting to know where their food comes from and how it is pro-

duced. Her desire is to work in the dairy industry focusing on dairy management and local food production systems.

From a family dairy near Strykersville, New York, Danille Pingrey attends Penn State and was selected to participate in the Dairy Consortium. Her goal after graduation in 2016 is to work in some aspect of the dairy industry while continuing to help on her family's dairy farm.

The students in the 6-week Dairy turn to page 7

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In mid-May, Clover Knolls Dairy near Texico, N.M. was one of 25 dairies these 50 college students from 16 U.S. universities as well as Canada, Australia and New Zealand visited for the applied learning portion of the U.S. Dairy Training and Education Consortium. The 6-week course started with 18 students as the former Southwest Great Plains Dairy Training and Education Consortium in 2007 and has maxed out at 50 in 2014 as a nationwide program with over 50 sponsors ranging from universities to dairy cooperatives to lenders, processors and allied dairy industry.

Photo by Sherry Bunting



## Consortium from page 3

Consortium for 2014 came from as far east as Penn State and the University of Florida to as far west as Washington State -- and points in between. Interestingly, Texas native Blythe Shill, attending Texas A&M, said her aspirations are to move to Pennsylvania after graduation next year to "find her place in the thriving dairy industry in Pennsylvania, focusing on dairy management."

Haagevort noted that New Mexico and Pennsylvania have collaborated on education for both students and extension.

The Dairy Consortium instructors are equally widespread geographically and by discipline. They hail from multiple universities -- each covering a specific aspect of the training.

For example, Lisa Holden, Penn State University associate professor of dairy science, flew out as the instructor for the week that was devoted to on-farm "human resource management."

"The Consortium brings together experts to talk with the kids on large herd theory and then we visit 25 to 30 dairies in the area to see the management applied, hands-on," said Haagevort.

During the Consortium, the learning focuses on cattle health and nutrition, reproduction, milk quality, human resources, sustainability, environmental quality. "Everything that deals with dairy," he added. "The students work in the classroom and on large-herd dairies. They palpate cows, take milk and blood samples, listen, learn and practice."

In mid-May, they were found visiting Clover Knolls Dairy near Texico, New Mexico, where the focus was to pick owner Tio Ford's brain on his management of herd health and nutrition, particularly the dry cow and pre-fresh rations that are ramped up to the milk cow diet, and to talk about his high quality milk.

The 3000-cow dairy is owned and operated by Tio and Chyanne Ford. Chyanne's parents Doug and Irene Handy have Do-Rene Dairy of a similar size nearby. While

Ford's family has been rooted in New Mexico for over 100 years, it was Chyanne's grandfather who left the cold winters of northwestern Pennsylvania for the dryland farming and drylot dairying of eastern New Mexico in the 1950s.

As the students listened to Ford talk about his dairy, they got a good feel for the benefits and challenges of dairying in the Southwest.

"This climate is great for cattle; however, rumen upsets can be prompted by sudden changes in weather -- like the wind today," Tio explained as the wind picked up and a storm rolled in, promising the first moisture in the area in months during the multi-year drought. "We had our first two DA's recently, but our goal is zero. They are not normal here, so if we have them, we know there is a problem somewhere in the system."

Ford added that a whole host of factors can throw off the digestive system of the cows -- from weather related stress, to not being fed correctly, to feed not being mixed correctly or

dry matter changes not accounted for, to overcrowding.

"One key employee can turn a dairy," said Haagevort. "If you are good at what you do, you will be around."

At Clover Knolls, the stocking rate is kept between 70 and 85%, according to Ford.

Haagevort explained that "this leaves holes open so cows can be next to their 'friends' and gives heifers some space to find a spot to eat where they don't have to stand beside the big, bossy mamas. The key is to make sure they have space to put their heads down and eat, without getting knocked around by other cattle."

With beef prices having reached all-time highs last spring, Ford told the students how he is using the high beef prices to adjust his culling criteria to keep his cattle stocking densities in line. He pointed out a 4-year-old cow that would bring \$1500 at the market cow (beef) price levels in May (higher now). If she is milking below the 60-lb "break even," she would be

culled.

"The main culling criteria is reproduction," he said. "Cows that aren't bred by 100 days in milk are culling candidates. We also don't keep a cow that goes to the hospital pen for her third time."

Ford focuses on milk quality and achieves an average somatic cell count of 92,000 on his 3000-cow herd with production averaging 85 pounds/cow/day.

"This area is known for its milk quality," Haagevort added. "We have a low-humidity climate. When it rains, that brings the mud, but most of the time this area is known for being able to get the high quality milk production. There are some parts of the country that have more difficulty achieving that because of persistent humidity."

The U.S. Dairy Education and Training Consortium is supported by cooperating universities and allied dairy industries. More information is available at <http://usdetc.tamu.edu/>

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