



Bolstering California Dairy Sustainability, Because It Really Matters

Speakers at the sixth California Dairy Sustainability Summit discussed water challenges, while promoting collaboration and practical solutions.

More than 115 California dairy farmers gathered alongside partners and policymakers on March 24 to have meaningful conversations about the future. At this sixth iteration of the California Dairy Sustainability Summit, water scarcity was the central topic. Themes of connectiveness, complexity, and affordability also carried through. Collaborative leadership and individual dairy farmers were recognized throughout the day, all for the sake of sustainability.

In the California dairy sector, commitment to sustainability has long been demonstrated through measurable progress, tremendous investments, and ongoing community involvement. Efforts are not focused on one environmental outcome, but many. As farms advance the protection of natural resources, they are also working to keep family farm legacies alive, continually improve the care of animals, sustain rural economies, meet customers' needs, and ensure the well-being of our food system.

With a total audience of more than 500, the 2026 Summit shined a light on the importance of dairy farming and ways that policymakers, technology and service providers, financial investors, and the broader community can help support farms. Dairy foods like yogurt, butter, and cheese are experiencing record growth. Consumers are increasingly turning to dairy products to meet their health and wellness goals. Meanwhile, California's dairy farm families are facing significant operational challenges. Most substantial is the issue of increasing water scarcity, accompanied by the need to continue improving water quality protection.

One attendee, Brian Villacorta of The Coombs-Hopkins Company, posted his greatest takeaway on [LinkedIn](#):

“The next generation is ready—bringing energy and new thinking. Creativity and calculated risk-taking are no longer optional. Water challenges are interconnected—and so are the solutions. Bottom line: Sustainability in California won't come from one breakthrough—it will come from persistence, partnership, and the willingness to invest in the long game.”

California dairy farmers and the state are already highly invested. Collectively, more than \$2 billion in public and private funds has been devoted to dairy methane reduction projects. California dairies have achieved an annual methane reduction of more than 5 million metric tons (CO₂e), a significant achievement of climate action.



More than 500 attendees gathered in Visalia for the California Dairy Sustainability Summit on March 24.



Attendees gained insights from speakers and exhibitors.

Further investment continues to be made now through the Dairy Plus program, funded by a USDA Advancing Markets for Producers grant, supporting on-farm projects aimed at both reducing methane emissions and improving water quality protection. Ensuring long-term economic viability and success of these efforts should remain a top concern.

The dairy farmers who spoke at the Summit shared their own concerns for the future. Third-generation dairy farmer Jack de Jong said the greatest challenge he sees is the unknown. He noted that farmers can do their best to strategize and invest in technologies that will help them better manage resources, but they can't prepare for what they don't see coming. Continually evolving water policies are one of the most daunting unknowns.

As noted in the opening remarks, abundant food production should not be taken for granted by state leaders. Many California dairy families have closed their operations or moved out of state over the years. While the sector remains strong today, a whole-systems perspective is needed to ensure it remains this way.

Dr. Claudia Carter, Executive Director of the California Wheat Commission, attended the Summit to gain a broader perspective on sustainable agriculture. She shared the following observation on [LinkedIn](#):

“From water and SGMA, to forage, dairy, nutrition, and the families and consumers at the end of the food system... every conversation kept pointing back to the same thing: none of this work happens in silos.

It was also a great reminder that sustainability conversations in California are no longer just about production; they are about long-term resource management, economic realities, and keeping whole food systems viable.

One of my favorite takeaways came from the final panel when Geoffrey Vanden Heuvel asked: who is your [water] user?

That question really stayed with me.

Because when you follow it through... from the forage producer, to dairies, to processors, to grocery stores, to families, and ultimately to the child... you realize just how much every part matters.”

While this 2026 California Dairy Sustainability Summit was similar to previous events, the stakes felt a bit higher for some farmers in attendance. The incredible leadership and resiliency of California dairy farmers continue to be tested. Securing a better water future for California agriculture is paramount. Sharing hope, along with appreciation, understanding, and effective partnership is critical to keeping family dairy farms thriving here, and in keeping local families nourished with the milk and dairy foods they want.

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Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care. Our members include Bar 20 Dairy Farms, Clover Sonoma, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Dairy Research Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America, Dairy Institute of California, F & R Ag Services, Hilmar Cheese Company, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O'Lakes, Inc, Milk Producers Council, Valley Milk, LLC, Saputo, Yosemite Farm Credit, Zenith Insurance Company, and others. For information, visit [DairyCares.com](#). To subscribe to the newsletter, contact news@dairycares.com.



Dairy farmer woman leaders were recognized for their contributions to farms and communities.