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Fourth California Dairy Sustainability Summit Marks Success

Dairy sector recognizes achievements and promotes progress in nourishing people and the planet.

The fourth California Dairy Sustainability Summit marked milestones in world-leading progress and highlighted important partnerships. Held at UC Davis on March 26, 200-plus stakeholders participated in person, with another 150 people watching live. Participants included many from throughout the dairy supply chain (farmers, processors, restaurants, and school nutrition leaders), in addition to academic researchers, NGOs, state and local regulators, policymakers, and technology and service providers.

“Our goals for the Summit have always been to recognize achievements and promote collaboration as we tackle significant challenges,” said Michael Boccadoro, Executive Director of Dairy Cares. “California’s dairy families serve as global leaders in advancing planet-smart dairy farm practices. A key ingredient to this success has been the state’s voluntary, incentive-based approach.”



The fourth California Dairy Sustainability Summit was held at UC Davis.

California’s dairy sector is on a path to achieving climate neutrality by as early as 2027, aiming to reach the state’s ambitious goal to reduce methane emissions by 40 percent by 2030. Progress has been made through decades of advancing production efficiency and animal health and nutrition, in addition to unprecedented, ongoing investments in improved manure management. The state’s dairy methane reduction programs have achieved a total of 2.7 million metric tons of annual emission reductions (CO₂e).

Over the past few years, California’s dairy methane reduction programs have been among the state’s most cost-effective efforts reducing climate emissions, and this progress is now expanding. With support from USDA Climate Smart Commodities grant funding and through industry efforts led by the California Dairy Research Foundation, the CDFA is now administering an additional Dairy PLUS program to support advanced manure management projects that better protect groundwater while also reducing methane emissions. Additionally, CDFA is beginning to create a new program to support the adoption of feed additives and other strategies to reduce enteric methane emissions from cows. The Summit highlighted these milestones, as well as other critical on-farm advancements being made to improve air quality, water quality, and water conservation.

Keeping the big picture in mind, several speakers recognized that California’s dairy sustainability efforts are ultimately working to ensure access to affordable and enjoyable milk and dairy foods that are critical to nutrition. Dr. Betty Crocker, Director of Child Nutrition Services at Lodi Unified School District, highlighted the value of dairy being included in each school meal, helping ensure children receive adequate nutrition.

More than 25 speakers shared expertise and insights during the one-day conference. Key takeaways included:

Dairy farmers are taking action today and using research to guide long-term success.

The Summit included research facility tours and a research poster session that highlighted some of the many ways in which researchers are guiding the advancement of dairy farming, as well as advancing the role dairy foods can play in promoting human health. While some promising environmental solutions are still being

proven for full-scale use, dairy farmers are taking meaningful action to address challenges today. For example, dairy farmers throughout the San Joaquin Valley are participating in their local, rural communities to ensure all residents have immediate access to safe drinking water. Meanwhile, a variety of long-term solutions are starting to be piloted and deployed on dairies, to better protect groundwater resources.

It is important to work with farmers toward sustainability goals.

California's leadership and success in dairy methane reduction stems from its collaborative approach—working with farmers to invest in the future. Environmental NGOs, leading food and beverage companies, and national, state, and local government agencies have also been working alongside dairy farmers to bring a broad range of sustainability solutions to life. Angela Anderson, Director of Sustainable Dairy for Starbucks, discussed how the company has been working with dairy farmers to identify opportunities that best fit the farm's environmental and economic sustainability needs, and to share in the costs of implementing projects. Partnering with California's largest dairy cooperative, California Dairies, Inc. and its farmer owners, Starbucks has developed its new model that continues to grow—bringing water conservation tools, electric tractors, and improved manure management technologies to farms.

Similarly, the environmental non-profit, Sustainable Conservation—in partnership with dairy farmers, Netafim, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service—developed a new irrigation system for dairies, and they continue to promote its adoption. Today, 26 dairies in California have installed manure-effluent subsurface-drip-irrigation systems—improving water conservation and protection, while reducing greenhouse emissions, and improving yields. These are just a few of the examples in which partners are helping dairy farm families to quickly move the needle for environmental goals, while supporting long-term sustainability needs.

Cool technologies are coming to (and from) California dairies.

From high-tech, automated farm equipment to the use of manure-digesting worm beds, dairy farms are investing in some cool, new things. Energy captured by methane digesters is fueling more than 15,000 vehicles annually—by creating electricity, renewable natural gas, and now renewable hydrogen too. Innovative solutions are taking the dairy sector to new horizons, while helping transform the energy sector. The new frontier for California dairy sustainability will likely soon include the adoption of methane-reducing feed additives.

A global perspective is needed to truly protect people and the planet.

As Patrick Pulupa, Executive Officer of the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, shared during the Summit, “You have arguably *the* most sustainable dairy industry on the face of the planet, working toward sustainability, with the methane emissions, with the digesters, with manure management, with sustainable soils, support from CDFR, a locally sourced, healthy product.” While California dairy's sustainability journey continues, it's already an inspiring story, and the “ripple effect of that will be enormous,” as stated by Mary Ledman, Global Dairy Strategist for Rabobank. This means that California's efforts must prove to be economically viable and successful in the long-term *and* be replicated across the country and the globe. Approximately 80% of the global dairy sector's emissions are generated in countries with emerging economies, where dairy plays a critical role in improving human health and nutrition and improving livelihoods through economic growth. In these areas, pathways to reduce dairy's environmental footprint often begin with adopting more efficient practices and boosting animal nutrition. California dairy's history of achievement and ongoing commitment offer a lot to learn from—providing critical benefits to people, animals, and the planet.

California dairy farmers continue to lead the way, collaborating to sustainably nourish lives now and into the future.

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

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-Patrick Pulupa
Executive Officer
Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board

