It is bittersweet to announce John Conway’s retirement this month after more than a 30-year career in dairy agriservice and extension. John was one of the original members of Pro-Dairy, giving him a 24-tenure with Cornell Cooperative Extension. The last 8 years shared with our program. John’s energy and response to clients will be sorely missed. John led many valuable extension and applied research projects. Of note were the Tie Stall Renovation Workshop Series, organizing the annual statewide Winter Dairy Management Schools and the Operations Manager’s Conference, renewing the Managing for Success Workshop and most recently the Group-Housed Calf Feeding workshops. John did an excellent job of assessing the impact of our extension work. After analysis on tons of silage arriving at bunk, time between loads and weights of tractor, the value of forage or bunk space conserved, he convinced many farms to install a concrete weight on the tractor to increase packing weight. The extra packing weight increased bunk capacity as well as reduced dm losses. A spreadsheet was developed to predict the value of cow comfort investments that combined improved production and reduced non voluntary culling.

John was dedicated, knowledgeable and connected. We will miss him and his contributions to our team and throughout the state.

John was also a strong force in the Cow Assess Series which combined classroom training with hands-on skill building. Workshops addressed hoof care, feeding, and fresh cow management diagnosis and health. John and his wife have moved to the Southwest to enjoy a more pleasant climate. We send them off with the best of wishes for their next stage of life.
The year 2012 revealed that the implementation of barley fodder use may provide an opportunity for niche dairy marketing in the Fingerlakes/South Central New York region. Fay Benson, small dairy technologies educator has been leading this effort statewide. On May 9, Fay and John Stoltzfus of Organic Valley Coop co-hosted a farm field day at the Stoltzfus Farm with funding from the Cornell Small Farm program and the USDA’s Crop Insurance Education Grant.

The farm field day targeted organic dairy farmers with an emphasis on the Old Order Amish. Approximately 115 residents of New York and Pennsylvania participated. Conversations with participants indicated further interest in educational opportunities on the use of barley fodder and also revealed other farmers who were considering the implementation of barley fodder.

Stoltzfus and Fay continued to reach out to organic dairy farmers. To that end, Fay assisted Stoltzfus in the creation of a powerpoint presentation which he in turn used at an event in Ohio. Further, on November 27, with the assistance of Debra Helebra of E-Organic, CCE and Stoltzfus hosted a webinar on barley fodder which was a large success. Of all the dairy webinars to date, the barley fodder webinar had the highest attendance yet of any of our dairy webinars. Of the 436 who hit the registration button, 177 participants (41%) participated in the webinar. The highest of any of our dairy webinars! The breakdown of participation by region: 29% Northeastern, 29% Midwestern and 29% Western, while the Southern region accounted for the remaining 13%.

(It should be noted that the webinar also had three participants from Canada and one from Ukraine). The webinar was also notable for having the highest percentage of farmer participants (54%). The remaining participants were Extension faculty and staff (12%), NRCS and other USDA personnel (7%), other university researchers and educators (6%), and miscellaneous others from non-profits, industry, press, etc. (21%). Participant evaluations showed that the webinar resulted in 88% of the attendees declaring a better understanding of how to use barley fodder on organic dairy farms as a direct result, and 64% indicated they would make a change on their own farms or would use the new information to advise other farmers.

Participants of the webinar indicated a desire for more educational opportunities on the use of barley fodder and had many follow-up requests including the inquiry if chlorinated water could still be used under the regulations of organic certification. Finally, this continued need and interest in barley fodder implementation has lead to the award of additional grants from the Farm Viability Institute and the Towards Sustainability Foundation to expand this work.
Group-Housed Calf Systems Movement gets Toehold in New York State
Symposium, Tours, Winter Dairy Management Contribute to Rise

John Conway, Curt Gooch, Jason Karszes, Heather Darrow

Stakeholders

- NYS Dairy Producers
- Dairy Support AgriService

Issue

Dairy calves have been the neonatal growth underachievers for as far back as anyone can remember. It's certainly not a genetics thing – beef calves nursing cows on half-way decent pasture in a forgiving climate can gain well in excess of 2 lbs. per day. That's on-par with other domestic species that have ad libitum availability of Mother's milk and normal exposure to pathogens in their immediate environment.

We've known for a long time what dairy calves need nutritionally for rates of gain similar to their beef cousins. The stumbling block to “normal” performance has been trying to find the “sweet spot” combining quality/quantity fed, labor to feed it and an environment that minimizes disease challenges. Most attempts over the years got us 2 of the three (above). The calf hutch arrived on the scene 30 years ago and helped solve the disease challenge dilemma. Few were willing to invest in the labor needed to feed calves at least 3 times per day, and digestive issues limited the quantity of milk that could be successfully fed twice per day.

Two technologies on the feeding/labor side have revolutionized the quality/quantity fed part of the equation. Autofeeders (robots) allow you to program in as many meals of a particular meal size as it takes to approximate ad libitum feeding. Preserved (acidified) milk free-choice ad libitum feeders safely allow calves to consume what they want, when they want it. Average daily gains (ADG) on these systems can get in the beef-calf-on-cow neighborhood of 2+ pounds. While we are not there yet, improvements in barn environments (ventilation systems, more and cleaner bedding, etc.) have allowed us to run these calves in small groups often with very minimal disease problems. Fortunately the well-fed calf’s immune system can deal with pathogen exposure in the improved environments we are learning how to provide.

Cornell researchers (Van Amburgh, et. al.) have demonstrated a significant production and economic gain in cows’ first and subsequent lactations when ADG as neonatal calves has been “normalized”. Sadly, we likely could have afforded to give those hutch calves a third feeding all along. The pendulum seems to be swinging in favor of group-housed, ad libitum-fed calf systems due to a tremendous advantage in labor savings over calves individually housed and hand fed. The other known advantage to rearing calves in small groups comes from more normalized socialization. Group-reared calves do perform better than those raised individually post-weaning. Ongoing studies will hopefully show to what extent so we can put a value on a “socialization dividend”

Response:

A working group of PRO-DAIRY Staff, CCE Extension Specialists and Practicing Veterinarians planned a campaign to create awareness for and provide technical know-how to start up a successful group-housed, ad libitum-fed calf system. Campaign components included:

- Newsletter and trade magazine articles (4) exploring different aspects of why? how? and performance/financial benefits
- An evening, facilitated discussion session among those experienced with group-housed calf systems in advance of the symposium (next below)
- A full-day, comprehensive symposium for farms with systems, farms wanting to learn more and folks from agri-service who support or will be supporting farms with group-housed calf systems
- Follow-up tours in 11 locations across NYS to benefit symposium attendees and anyone else who could not make the symposium but could make it to a closer-to-home farm in a mid-day timeframe.
- A slightly truncated version of the symposium with in-state speakers as the 2012 “Winter Dairy Management” series.

The “1150′s” Group at Beller Farms
Results:
An overwhelming response among those with group-housed calf systems, those committed to starting up a system, those seeking more information as well as a tremendous response from agri-service. Attendees at the different educational forums:
Ø Facilitated discussion for farms with group-housed calf systems – 76 attendees
Ø Symposium – 280 attendees in-person and 48 attendees via webinar
Ø Tours 397 attendees across 11 locations
Ø 2012 Winter Dairy Management – 368 attendees over 8 NYS locations

Impact
² Many new start-up group-housed calf systems in NYS and VT directly related to this campaign. We are assessing numbers at this time. Those with systems prior to the symposium was estimated at 56 “known “. That has risen to 75 and is likely to continue rising.
² A large percentage of those with systems have been polled. All express productivity and/or labor savings gain over what they were doing with calves prior. Digestive problems are “nearly non-existent”. Respiratory problems vary by the farm and individual barn environment. Ventilation improvements are being made and evaluated incrementally. To our knowledge, no new start-up has pulled the plug and returned to their prior system.
² An economic evaluation of 4 farms with group-housed calf systems was conducted in Fall 2011. Performance was compared among the systems (which varied in technology adopted) and with a group of 11 top performing farms with conventional systems evaluated in 2008. Numbers from the 2008 evaluation were corrected with 2011 purchased inputs costs and output values. As expected, two of the group-housed system farms who were better off compared to what they had prior, had costs of raising calves from birth to 200 pounds higher than the 2008 farms and two had costs lower than the 2008 group. Cost categories were as expected...more feed was consumed in the group housed systems and on average it took less labor expense. These systems appear to work as expected.

Collaborators:

Working Group
Dr. Mark Thomas, Countryside Vets
Dr. Bob Ceglowski, Rupert Vet Clinic
Dr. Jerry Bertoldo, NWNY Dairy Team
Frans Vokey, Lewis CCE
John Conway, PRO-DAIRY

Tour Host Farms
Southtown Dairy, S. New Berlin
Poverty Hill Farm, Albion
True Farm, Perry
Woody Hill Farm, Salem
Kelly Farm, Rensselaer Falls
Allenwaite Farm, Schaghticoke
Murcrest Farm, Copenhagen
Beller Farm, Carthage
Woods Hill Farm, Turin
Lawnhurst Farm, Stanley
Cornell T & R Farm, Harford

Symposium Presenters
Dr. Mark Thomas, Countryside Vets
Dr. Bob Ceglowski, Rupert Vet Clinic
Dr. Neil Anderson, OMAFRA
Dr. Ken Nordlund, University of Wisconsin
John Hanchar, NWNY Dairy Team
Dr. Mike Van Amburgh, Cornell An. Sci.
Dr. Rodrigo Bicalho, Cornell Vet. School

WDM Presenters
Dr. Mark Thomas, Countryside Vets
Dr. Bob Ceglowski, Rupert Vet Clinic
Dr. Jerry Bertoldo, NWNY Dairy Team
Jackson Wright, NWNY Dairy Team
Curt Gooch, PRO-DAIRY
John Hanchar, NWNY Dairy Team
John Conway, PRO-DAIRY
Dr. Kim Morrill, NENY Dairy Team
Dr. Larry Chase, Cornell An. Sci.
Dr. Mike Van Amburgh, Cornell An. Sci.
Dr. Paul Virkler, Cornell Vet. Support Svcs.
Kerri Bartlett, Steuben, CCE

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Frans Vokey, Lewis CCE
Ron Kuck, Jefferson CCE
Lisa Kempisty, Chautauqua, CCE
John Conway, PRO-DAIRY

Pens of 8 clean, thrifty calves move through system