

REDUCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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First, eight dairy farms have contacted the Department of Agriculture saying they wished to participate in the joint Florida Department of Agriculture/South Florida Water Management District program to cease milking operations in the Lake Okeechobee Drainage Basin. Second, the Florida Audubon Society has challenged the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan because it leaves dairy farmers under the Department of Environmental Regulation. That review challenge will go to the Land and Water Adjudicatory Commission which consists of the Governor and Cabinet. Third, after six months of objections, meetings and counteroffers, the Governing Board of the Southwest Florida Water Management District took just 45 minutes to change its rules whereby mandatory metering will be implemented on large agricultural water users in that District. And finally, a prominent state senator has received numerous letters and phone calls about a proposed dairy in the Suwannee River Water Management District and asked state agencies how they are responding. And, it all happened in the last two weeks.

Florida is a powerhouse state in our nation. One movie studio opened this weekend in Orlando and another one will open before the end of the year. Business people have recognized what many local and state officials are reluctant to admit. Florida can no longer conduct itself as it did 20 years ago when we had less than half of today's population.

The attitudes of our basically urban-oriented population confound us. "Where do they think food comes from?" we ask. They might respond "Where do you think clean water comes from?" Our nest is getting smaller every day and our opportunities to fowl our nest are expanding every day.

If we do not want more government oversight and regulation, then we must earn the right to not get it. Some things that you can and should consider to move our industry out of the environmental limelight are:

- A. Become your brothers' keeper. Suwannee County dairy farmers meet informally for dinner from time-to-time. It offers fellowship and a chance to discuss conditions. No man (or dairy) is an island. As we now know in the Okeechobee area, one poorly managed lagoon ruins it for an entire sub-basin. Neighbor support and a little chiding can prove important in environmental awareness.
- B. Get a water permit and meter your usage. Whether we like it or not, fighting over available water sources is growing every day.

Your historic right to water is greatly strengthened by the possession of a valid Consumptive Use Permit. You should even consider the installation of in-line flowmeters and monthly tabulations of your usage. It is a further protection of your historic right to the water. On a SWFWMD Consumptive Use Permit, you will now have to document it if you are asking for more water than they can calculate that you need. "I don't know" is no longer a politically advantageous position for agriculture.

- C. Install Monitoring Wells. Monitoring wells, properly designed, installed and routinely sampled, provide an historic record of oversight and responsibility that can more than pay for themselves in any future challenges. They may also pinpoint problems before they can cause an offsite complication. Showing such records to an investigating officer is far better than "I'm not polluting!" The former is proof, the latter is a meaningless claim.
- D. Have Valid Engineering Plans and then follow up with an annual review. Any business that carries the environmental impact of a commercial dairy farm should have an up-to-date engineering plan for its waste management and have the engineers conduct an annual on-site review.

This way, not only is the likelihood of a problem greatly diminished, nuisance complaints from an irate neighbor are easily handled with documentation. Cost is not a valid excuse for not having a plan since unlike most businesses, you can call on the USDA Soil Conservation Service to design a Conservation Plan for your farm at no cost to you. If you do not wish to use the SCS, private agricultural engineers are available. You would not build a parlor without a blueprint, you should not be operating your farm without an engineered waste management system.

I would urge you to read, and perhaps file for future reference, the environmental column in the May issue of Southeastern Dairy Review on what to do if a regulatory agency receives a complaint about your dairy. Dairy farming can survive in the heady commercial climate of 1989 Florida, but only if we plan and manage for it environmentally as well as economically.

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