

An “Out-Sider’s” Viewpoint of the Florida Check-Off Program

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Sunbelt Dairy Federation. At that time, as now, Georgia dairymen were frustrated with the inability to acquire the extra income that our dairymen thought was needed and justified to insure an adequate supply of local milk. The federation helped but we saw more and more milk coming in and limiting the premium. Also, there was the subtle price cutting within caused by handlers ability to buy milk at a lower price from independent producers and still pay them more because of the cost of operating cooperatives.

Georgia Milk Producers – “What can we do?” We wound up publishing the *Southeast Milk Producer* magazine for the purpose of improving communication among dairymen in the Southeast.

One of my first trips was in the early 1990's to do an article on the dairy industry in Florida. One focus of the Florida story was the environmental crisis in Florida. The other was ways Florida dairymen were coping with heat, humidity, and quality forage. I looked at the work the University of Florida had done in those areas which certainly was impressive and had a lengthy discussion with Roger Natzke. We talked about the need and possibilities of more coordination and cooperation and, possibly, consolidation of dairy support programs in the Southeast, particularly in the area of research.

After a lapse of about 5 years, I came back to Florida to see how this program was doing. While most, if not all of the other dairy programs in the Southeast were experiencing severe cuts, loss of scientists, and loss of students, Florida's dairy programs seemed to be flourishing. One of the things that particularly impressed me was the excitement of the dairy scientists because of their ability to work as partners with dairy farmers. This was my first really close look at the Check-Off Program in Florida.

Georgia Milk Producers Dairy Research and Education Committee, chaired by Lamar Anthony, for a number of years has talked about the need for such a program in Georgia. Lamar is a dairyman from Americus, GA and contends that no matter what kind of marketing program, supply management, dairy compact or what-have-you that is put in place to raise the price of milk, if there is an advantage to sell milk in our market somebody will figure out a way to do it. Lamar says, "The only long term fix to the problem is to be able to produce the milk at a lower cost than anyone else plus their cost of bringing the milk in."

Yesterday (May 3, 1999), we experienced a great victory in Georgia with Governor Barnes signing the dairy compact. I think the Southern Dairy Compact can accomplish a lot to solve our regional problem of competing with the cost of an alternative supply on a year-round basis. I think now is an excellent time for Georgia to join Florida in jumping on the cost of production side of the equation. I believe this is the only way we can insure for the long haul a successful dairy industry in the Southeast.

The Georgia Agricultural Commodity Commission for Milk has just approved a referendum to be held for Georgia producers to decide whether they want an additional assessment of 1 cent/cwt. to fund a producer association and/or an additional 1 cent/cwt. to fund a producer controlled, applied research program similar to the Florida program.

On-farm experimentation can be very expensive because the very word, experimenting, means you are going to try something that is unproven and when it fails, money usually is lost. The other problem with on-farm experimenting done by farmers is that usually it isn't shared very far. If it takes three or four tries on every experiment you are going to have to reproduce your successes many times to get your losses back.

This should tell how this "out-sider" views the Florida Check-Off Program. Wouldn't it be great if we could get similar programs throughout the Southeast? "Working together" is what it is really all about.