



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Dairy Education & Training Consortium.

The 15th year of the program concluded in late June with a class of 54 students.

Preparing the next generation: Dairy Consortium celebrates 15 years of dairy education

Progressive Dairy Editor **Kimmi Devaney**

In the mid-to-late 2000s, dwindling university dairy herds and dairy programs in the Southwest led Dr. Mike Tomaszewski from Texas A&M and Dr. Robert Hagevoort from New Mexico State University (NMSU) – along with Dr. Bob Collier, previously with the University of Arizona – to develop a program that provides university students with a hands-on dairy education to prepare them for careers in the dairy industry. The U.S. Dairy Education and Training Consortium – formerly the Southern Great Plains Dairy Consortium – was established in 2008 with a class of 18 students. The six-week summer program has taken place in Clovis, New Mexico, for the past 15 years.

“The original concept was to provide opportunities for our students to be exposed to dairy management since it wasn’t being taught on campus,” Tomaszewski says. “We wanted to incorporate cows and dairy producers into the program, and we’ve been able to fulfill our original goal.”

Dairy faculty from across the nation teach students about an array of dairy management topics, including dairy finance, economics, facility design, cow comfort, technology, precision management, sustainability, nutrition, reproduction, milk quality, dairy safety, transition cow management and special topics. In addition to classroom learning, students travel to dairies almost daily to see real-world application. To test their knowledge, students take quizzes at the end of each module, and they must have at least a 70% average after the second

week to remain in the program. For students required to take the course as part of their dairy major or minor, grades are reported to their home universities.

“The hands-on training on dairies is invaluable,” Hagevoort says. “You can teach whatever you want in the classroom, but if you don’t get students out into the real world, they are totally disconnected.”

More than 660 students have participated over the past 15 years. As the program has grown, class sizes have expanded from one session with 18 students in 2008 to now 50 to 60 students each year split between an introductory session focused on dairy production and an advanced one dedicated to management principles. Alumni are now working on dairies as herd managers and owners and in the allied industry as dairy consultants, veterinarians, extension educators, communications professionals, FDA inspectors, risk management specialists, loan officers, university professors and more.

“The thing I am most proud of with the consortium is our graduates,” Tomaszewski says. “I see many of them in industry positions that they might not be in without this program.”

Hagevoort agrees.

“The stories from alumni are phenomenal,” he adds. “When we meet with past students from the first few years who are now established professionals in the industry and hear their stories, many say the Dairy Consortium got them on that track, opened their eyes to the opportunities available in the

dairy industry and helped them decide what they wanted to do.”

Helping students decide what they want to do after graduation has become an added benefit of the program.

“A lot of students do not come out of their four years at a university with a good, clear view of what it is that they could or should do,” Hagevoort says. “We see them coming into our program, having just graduated from college and they still have no clue what they want to do. And then after six weeks in Clovis, being out on dairies and hearing about these industry companies, they start to find a sense of direction.”

Josh Hoffman was a member of the inaugural class in 2008 and joined the consortium to finish his dairy science degree at Texas A&M and gain a broader understanding of the dairy industry. He was originally an aerospace mechanical engineering major before switching to animal science during his junior year of college and then completing an additional bachelor’s degree in dairy science.

“At that point, I knew I wanted to do something in the dairy industry but didn’t have a clear direction as to what specifically I wanted to do,” Hoffman says. “The consortium really helped prepare me for what I’m doing today.”

Hoffman has been the manager at Natural Prairie Dairy in Texas and is transitioning into the independent management sector.

“Networking within the group of students and with the sponsors is an opportunity that I don’t think you will get anywhere else,” Hoffman



Kimmi Devaney

Editor

Progressive Dairy

kimmi@progressivepublish.com

says. “If you want to go into the dairy industry, it’s a must. It’s going to give you a foundation to help you start your career.”

Alex Corpus was in the 2019 class and is now a veterinary intern working at Cnossen Dairy in Texas for the summer. After graduating from vet school, she hopes to become a dairy veterinarian or join a mixed-animal practice.

“I didn’t know anything about the dairy industry before coming to the consortium, and it’s because of this program that I became interested in a career in dairy,” she says. “It was also very helpful since it allowed me to meet my graduate adviser, Dr. Barbara Jones, and then it set me up well for vet school. The consortium jump-started my career in the dairy industry.”

Similarly, Jaquelyn Dana did not have a dairy background and came to the consortium in 2023 hoping to gain large-animal experience. She recently graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in animal science and is currently applying to vet school.

“I’ve worked with dogs, cats and elephants before, but never livestock,” she says. “Once I started taking my dairy course at A&M, I fell in love with dairy and thought, ‘Why not try to get hands-on experience and see if this is something I like.’”

Continued on page 32

Preparing the next generation: Dairy Consortium celebrates 15 years of dairy education, cont'd from page 31

The consortium opened my eyes to the dairy industry in general. I never knew there were so many opportunities in the dairy industry. It was also interesting learning about the complexities of dairies and how each one is different."

Visiting a different dairy every day and meeting dairy producers were some of her favorite parts of the program, and she says these visits helped her learn the why behind many farm practices.

"As a future veterinarian, this experience has opened my mind to why dairy producers do things the way they do," she says, "So much of it is about animal welfare and safety, and it's been nice to see different perspectives."

Networking lunches and presentations from sponsors also opened her eyes to other available opportunities within the industry.

"Through this experience, I've realized that being a vet isn't the 'end all, be all,'" she says. "It's still what I want to do, but now I know there are so many other opportunities out there in the dairy industry if I don't become a vet or even if I do and then decide to do something else later. Many of the industry representatives who have come to talk to us have told us how they had a career goal in college and then ended up doing something completely different. It gives me comfort to know that it's OK if my plan doesn't work out exactly how I have it planned right now, and just to be open to opportunities that may arise in the future."

Students' previous dairy experience ranged from those with minimal exposure to the dairy industry to students who grew up on dairies and plan to return to them after graduation.

Braedon Van Berkum is a senior at Texas Tech studying agricultural economics with a minor in animal



Holly Parks (left), Fresno State; Carrigan Fritz (middle), Texas A&M; and Mike Lee (right), Texas A&M; evaluate a dairy farm as part of their final project.

science. He grew up on his family's dairy farm in Everson, Washington, and plans to return home to manage the family farm alongside his brother after gaining more experience on other dairies after graduation.

"I liked getting the chance to interact with producers from all over the Southwest and students from across the nation," Van Berkum says. "We also have students from Canada and Germany in our class, and it's been interesting getting to learn from them."

He looks forward to bringing these experiences and everything he's learned back to his home dairy and also to the one he is working on while in college.

"One of my key takeaways is that there is always more to learn," Van Berkum says. "There is always more growth that can happen in this industry and progress that can be made."

Originally, students were only recruited from universities, but now a few come directly from dairy farms.

"We've had producers call and say their son knows how to breed, feed and treat their cows but needs to learn the business part of it and needs to understand [the] rest of the picture," Hagevoort says. "They ask if they can come to the consortium. Absolutely – that's exactly what this program is for. Going to college is not a prerequisite."

Travis Pirtle from P7 LLC in Roswell, New Mexico, participated in 2022 and 2023 and has completed both the introductory and advanced sessions.

"Growing up on a dairy farm, you learn what to do," Pirtle says. "So what I came here to learn is why I'm doing what I'm doing – the science behind it. Coming to the consortium last year really improved what I knew about the dairy industry. It helped me make decisions in some of the fields I help manage on our farm. So it's been a blessing to come here and learn what I needed to learn."

Pirtle's long-term plan is to be a dairy producer, and he wants to learn as much as possible as he transitions into management.

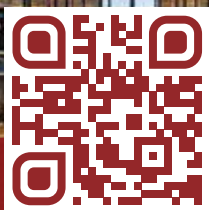
"It's an amazing program, and when the six weeks are over, you are going to miss it," he says. "Learning about futures and how to make a profit through the highs and lows that the dairy industry experiences were two of the key things I learned this summer. We also learned about employee management and trying to limit turnover as much as you can while still pushing for production."

While learning about futures, profitability and managing employees will have a direct application back home on the farm, Pirtle also gained another valuable resource during his two summers in Clovis.

"It's not about what you know; it's about who you know," he says. "The most interesting part of this program is the people I've been able to meet. The people you meet here become lifelong friends. It's amazing to see what this program has done for the dairy industry as a whole, and I hope it continues."

EZfeed Solves Real Feed Problems

and is flexible so it can be used with advanced batching and automation systems.



Watch a video about the advanced uses of EZfeed

Hagevoort echoes the value of networking with peers, other producers and industry representatives.

“It’s going to set Travis and other students up nicely to network with others in the industry,” Hagevoort says. “Many dairy kids have told us that they will go back to their notes and call their peers from the class to discuss challenging situations they encounter on the farm. The peer networking is so critical to be able to learn, better themselves and advance. That’s what these students are starting to do during their six weeks in Clovis, and they continue it when they go back to their dairies.”

During the final days of the program, teams of four students evaluate a dairy farm and present their recommendations to a panel of judges. This project brings together everything they learned throughout the past six weeks.

“Watching how students who came into this program with no dairy background and no dairy experience have transformed over the course of these six weeks is the most amazing part to me,” Hagevoort says. “By the end, they are evaluating dairies in their final presentation and getting into the nitty gritty of the technology, the management and all the areas involved in running a dairy, and we are evaluating them like they’ve been in dairy forever. To see what these students have done and where they end up is amazing.”

The program is completely funded by agribusiness, and many alumni are finding ways to continue their involvement.

“This program only exists because of the support from the industry,” Hagevoort says. “The industry has realized the value of what we are doing here from the beginning and how it is preparing students to be successful in the dairy industry, and we are grateful for their continued support. As our alumni are becoming established professionals in the industry, they are also talking up the consortium with their current employers and encouraging them to support it.”

Tomaszewski agrees.

“Many of our alumni want to come back, be involved and support the program in some way,” he adds. “This year, we had a few alumni speak to students about their career paths, and they also talked about the impact the consortium has had on them personally and professionally.”

In addition to hearing the impact the program has had on alumni as they built their careers, current students also expressed to Hagevoort and Tomaszewski how the program has influenced them.

“On the last day of the program this year, one of the students came up to us and said, ‘You changed my life,’” Tomaszewski says. “And we’ve heard variations of that from many of them.”

“As teachers and professors, we are all looking to make an impact. That’s what you hope for,” Hagevoort adds. “We hear it from the students and from the farms and companies that are hiring our alumni. We know we are making an impact, and there’s nothing better than that. We graduate 50-plus students each year that are potentially looking for jobs in the dairy industry, and there are some really good ones who will be extremely good employees on farms and in industry positions.”

“I just hope I can be here for another 15 years to do this,” Tomaszewski says. 🐮



Dr. Larry Fox, emeritus professor at Washington State University, leads a mammary anatomy laboratory with bovine udders for dissection.

We Help Dairy Farmers and Agribusiness

GROW & THRIVE

Genske Mulder is one of the largest CPA firms in the nation focused exclusively on the Dairy and Ag industries. Farmers have unique challenges and we’ve spent decades helping them grow and thrive financially.

Our clients produce nearly **32 billion** pounds of milk and own over **1.2 million** head of mature cows. That’s approximately **14%** of the nation’s production!

Let’s Talk

grow@genskemulder.com

ONTARIO

4150 E. Concours, Ste. 250
Ontario, CA 91764
(909) 483-2100

MODESTO

4803 Sisk Road, Ste. 201
Salida, CA 95368
(209) 523-3573

VISALIA

3714 W. Mineral King Ave.
Visalia, CA 93291
(559) 625-1867

COSTA MESA

3187 Red Hill Ave., Ste. 110
Costa Mesa, CA 92626
(949) 650-9580



GENSKE, MULDER & COMPANY, LLP
CERTIFIED PUBLIC ACCOUNTANTS