



“Breakfast on the Farm” builds rapport

Among all consumer groups, general positive impressions of dairy farms rose from 60 to 95 percent following an on-farm visit.

by Ted Ferris, Nancy Thelen, Mary Dunckel and Faith Cullens

WHAT do people think after they have been “down on the farm”? Many organizations are striving to reconnect consumers and farmers to educate the public on how their food is produced and to rebuild trust. Some of these efforts include educational farm tours, such as the Breakfast on the Farm program in Michigan (BOTF). These events in Michigan and other like events throughout the U.S. have built consumer trust via transparency that allows the public to see and learn firsthand, ask questions, give feedback, and develop trust in farmers and their products.

In Michigan, Breakfast on the Farm events are a program of Michigan State University Extension with collaboration and financial support from numerous local and state organizations. Our modern-day Breakfast on the Farm was initiated in Clinton County in 2009 by Michigan State University Extension Educator Faith Cullens in collaboration with the county Farm Bureau and other local organizations. Since 2009, more than 61,000 adults and children have attended 29 events held at 24 dairy farms, three beef operations, one crop farm and one apple farm. The events start with a breakfast followed by an educational, self-guided walking tour of farm facilities. Volun-

teers and various displays with brief messages provide information about modern dairy farming from calving to milk quality. Cow nutrition is explained by a nutritionist and health care is covered by a local veterinarian. Kids learn by completing a Kid's Quiz which encourages them to read displays and find the answers.

Who is attending?

Exit surveys were used to assess the impact of educational farm tours on participants' knowledge, impressions and trust in modern dairy production, both of products and farmers. Results from 2,964 participants attending 18 dairy farm tours from 2010 to 2012 show Breakfast on the Farm events in Michigan are attracting a significant nonfarm audience. Surveys indicate 44 percent of the visitors had not visited a dairy farm in the past 20 years (first-time visitors) and 21 percent had made only one or two prior dairy farm visits during the past two decades. Most visitors grew up in urban (34 percent) or rural areas not near farms (28 percent). Likewise, 31 percent currently live in urban areas, while 39 percent live in rural areas not near farms.

On exit surveys, visitors were asked to estimate their level of knowledge on eight topics “before” and “after” their farm tour using a five-point scale. First-time visitors felt they had less knowledge on topics “before” compared to all respondents. However, this new-

to-dairy group reported a greater knowledge with a two-point jump for five topics after their farm visit. In addition, 94 percent of all respondents indicated they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “I have a better understanding of modern dairy production” after attending a Breakfast on the Farm.

Simply said, we found having a firsthand experience on a modern farm helps consumers put things in perspective and changed their impressions about how dairy farmers manage farms and cows. This is evident as 92 percent of first-time visitors and 92 percent of all respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “My general impression about modern dairy farming has improved as a result of my visit today.”

Visitors in 2011 and 2012 rated their “General Impression” about four management topics “before” and “after” their visit (see table). The percentage of individuals with “positive” or “very positive” impressions about the four areas jumped from the 60s to about 95 percent for all respondents. Although first-time visitors had the lowest impressions before their tour, they had the greatest improvement in their impressions after. Only 0.7 to 1.4 percent of respondents left with “negative” or “very negative” impressions about the four management areas.

Educational farm tours build trust

The greatest shift in general impressions occurred for housing from 62 percent with “positive” or “very positive” impressions before their visit to 95 percent after seeing a farm. A large group (30 percent) had neither a “positive” nor “negative” impression before visiting a farm with that dropping to 4 percent after. Importantly, those with “very negative” or “negative” responses (2 percent and 6 percent, respectively) changed their impressions leaving only 0.1 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively, in these categories after. This may indicate that they had misconceptions or were misinformed and that seeing cows move freely to eat, socialize and lie down in comfortable stalls made a positive impression or for some, was different than they anticipated based upon their comments.

Two more questions helped gauge the improvement in public trust. For first-time visitors, 86 percent either “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “As a result of today's tour, my trust in milk as a safe food has increased” . . . with 81 percent of all respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing. To the statement “As a result of today's tour, my trust in dairy farmers as a source of information about food production” rose to 91 percent among the first-time visitors either agreeing or strongly agreeing with it.

The majority of the public is unfamiliar with modern food production and likely have difficulty sorting through information they receive from various sources. Educational farm tours, such as Breakfast on the Farm, provide the public an opportunity to learn firsthand, ask questions of farmers and other professionals and give feedback about modern food production. They are able to witness animal care, housing, and steps taken to ensure milk from cows treated with antibiotics is not sold. Concerned neighbors can see how manure is stored, handled and used for crops nutrients.

Exit surveys indicate that time down on the farm is helping the public understand how their food is produced, improving their impressions of modern dairy farms and bolstering their trust in farmers and food production. 🐄



If you are interested in learning about what's involved in developing educational farm tour programs, join the Michigan State eXtension webinar in late January at eXtension.org.

Seeing is believing on farm tours			
General impression statement	Respondent group	BEFORE	AFTER
		Positive or Very Positive	Positive or Very Positive
(%)			
Care for the environment	ALL	68	96
	First-time visitors	57	94
Treatment food-producing animals	ALL	65	95
	First-time visitors	53	94
Steps to safeguard milk	ALL	70	97
	First-time visitors	59	95
Housing provided dairy animals	ALL	62	95
	First-time visitors	49	93
Shift in percentage with Positive and Very Positive impressions on a five-point scale for four dairy management areas BEFORE and AFTER farm tours for ALL respondents (n=1472) and first-time visitors (n=604).			