

Dairy Farmers Encouraged To Become Image Conscious

By Glenn Graves

WALTON - Dairy and livestock farmers have a new partner in determining what is best for their farm animals - consumers and the general public.

During last week's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program meeting with Susquehanna River Basin farmers at the Walton Fire Hall, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County resource educator Mariane Kiraly explained that agricultural practices are facing scrutiny by the general public, which has influenced lawmakers in some states.

"What used to be standard practice can be misunderstood among non-farm populations and consumers," Kiraly said. "Animal rights activists have been successful in changing laws. Now is the time to be proactive in being ahead of the curve on animal welfare."

Kiraly said that an ABC "Nightline" piece on a western New York

dairy farm, which didn't prescribe to safe practices, painted all farmers in a poor light. She said it is standard practice to remove a newborn calf from its mother to minimize the chance of disease from ingested manure, but in the "Nightline" story, "It was shown in a negative light with verbiage, like, 'It is so sad for the cow and calf to be separated.'"

Kiraly said "Nightline" also visited other dairy farms, "and shot no footage, because the practices were sound."

She said use of tie stalls is also a problem for activists, but a common way to house cows in Delaware County. She said that outsiders often feel sorry for livestock that are housed outside.

Kiraly said that years like 2009, which was abnormally wet, can raise issues with consumers, as well. She said animal cleanliness should be a priority to avoid intervention from the public.

"The milk companies are getting pressure," she said, "and they will in turn put pressure on the

dairy farmers."

Kiraly suggested farmers look at their operations from the perspective of others, with no background in farming, and realize that there will eventually be people evaluating animal welfare practices on their farms. "You may think these folks have no power on your farm, but they have been able to influence regulations in other states," she said, pointing to California as an example.

"The image of agriculture is up to you," Kiraly said. "We need a confident consumer base that trusts farmers to take good care of animals and to provide wholesome food. When someone comes to the farm, be sure to educate them on why certain practices work well for animals and humans."

"There will always be bad actors among farmers, but if your farm is an example of high animal welfare standards and people can see that, you have a lot less to be concerned about."