

Knowledge and Education: essential for resolving environmental issues facing the dairy sector

During a two-days Stakeholder Conference in Ghent, Flanders, representatives of governments, dairy farmers and the dairy industry concluded that knowledge and education are essential for resolving environmental issues facing the dairy sector. Without proper knowledge and education, new and existing technologies and tools will not be successfully implemented by sector users. The conference, organised by the INTERREG IVB project DAIRYMAN, also disclosed interesting differences in environmental legislation and in economic and environmental results between the ten participating EU regions.

Good example

EU guest speakers, Mrs Inge Van Oost of the Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, and Mr Michael Hamell of the Directorate General for Environment, embraced the conclusions on knowledge and education. Mrs Van Oost described the new EU initiative for integrating Research and Innovation with Rural Development Policy through the development of a network called the European Innovation Partnership (EIP). Key ingredients of the EIP will include trans-national cooperation and networking focussing on knowledge development (research) and exchange, and on advice and education. She congratulated the DAIRYMAN project for its successful role as forerunner of the EIP Network and concluded that "the DAIRYMAN project is a good example of a 'thematic network' which could exist under the EIP network".

Pro-active

Mr Hamell stressed the necessity for dairy farmers and the sector as a whole to be more pro-active in addressing the environmental problems facing the industry in the forth-coming post quota era. He indicated that the sector needs to (1) reduce its Greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions, (2) improve its relationship with (sweet) water and (3) address biodiversity issues. To emphasise his point, Mr Hamell showed that there had been a 50% decline in butterflies over the past 20 years and stated that "for those who believe in reincarnation, they should better not come back as a butterfly in the near future". He then strongly advised the sector not to wait to be forced by EU legislation into achieving the necessary environmental goals.

Improved sustainability

DAIRYMAN has brought together farmers, researchers, students and farm advisors from 10 different regions of North West Europe (NWE) with the objective of improving the economic and ecological sustainability of dairy farming. At researcher level, the network has been instrumental in assessing and comparing dairy sector sustainability in the main dairying regions. It has also been instrumental in evaluating and critiquing the principles behind the regional implementation of EU Environmental legislation, and in identifying opportunities for improving the sustainability of dairying via stakeholder cooperation. At the wider stakeholder level, the network has facilitated the testing of innovative sustainable practices on 130 pilot farms. Here, researchers, advisors and pilot farmers have worked together to improve the sustainability of dairy farming by making more efficient use of fertiliser, feed and energy resources, in order to deliver improvements both in farm economics and in key environmental services, e.g. clean water, clean air and biodiversity. Exchange visits for farmers, students and advisors within the network have been organized to facilitate knowledge exchange. Other events and meetings have been organised to facilitate knowledge dissemination to external stakeholders such as local farmers, educational institutions and policy makers.

The INTERREG IVB project DAIRYMAN aims to strengthen rural communities in the regions of NWE where dairy farming is a main economic activity and a vital form of land use. It is anticipated that key outcomes of the project will be a more competitive dairy sector, stronger regional economies and improved ecological performance of dairy farming. The project involves 14 partner organizations from 10 regions of 7 countries in NWE, and is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.