

News Release

Teaming Up to Improve: Diagnostics Visit Designed to Help Dairy Farmers

By Elizabeth Tollefson on Wednesday, June 21, 2017

Entrepreneurs, like most business owners, are always on the lookout for ways to improve what they do and how they do it. Continuous improvement is certainly a goal for young dairy farmers like Karl Donner and Marissa McWilliam-Donner. The two recently hosted a visit by a team from the Minnesota Dairy Initiative's Dairy Development & Profitability Enhancement Program to help them do just that—continuously improve.



The diagnostic team consisted of several members chosen by the Donners to observe and evaluate their dairy operation and develop a set of recommendations around topics identified by the Donners to enhance the dairy operation. The team looks to address those issues but they often observe things during their visit that may be helpful to the farmer.

"We see things sometimes the farmers do not because we are looking at it from the outside with fresh eyes," says diagnostic team member Lyle Westrom, a professor of agriculture from the University of Minnesota Crookston.

For almost two decades, Westrom and his colleague Professor Harouna Maiga, who serves as the head of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Department at the U of M Crookston, have been involved in a number of these dairy diagnostic visits together and separately.

"I particularly enjoy the opportunity to participate in these visits," Maiga says. "I have been involved since the late 1990s with this initiative to help dairy farmers improve what they do."

Both Westrom and Maiga were mentored by Professor Emeritus George Marx, a former dairy scientist at the Northwest Research and Outreach Center and a widely-known dairy expert who conducted many of the diagnostic visits during his tenure.



Maiga, an expert in animal nutrition, along with Westrom, who focuses on aspects of the farm's management, were joined by team leader Kelly Klinkhammer, a farm business management instructor at Northland Community and Technical College, and Dr. Marceen Hammer of Cornerstone Vet in Gonvick, Minn.

Together the team addresses issues of concern as well as areas of opportunity for the Donners. "We were invited to participate on the Donner's diagnostic team based on our areas of expertise," says Maiga. "The farmers need help addressing issues they are facing on their farms and the range of topics may cover a wide spectrum from animal health and nutrition to profit margins and family relationships. It depends on what the individual farm and farmer needs."

"We have an opportunity to listen," Westrom explains. "But we also ask questions and take notice of how things are being done on the farm. It has proven very beneficial to have someone look at the details as well as the big picture."

With these visits, farmers, like the Donners, are given the opportunity to network with professionals, prioritize and adjust goals, and receive written reports for reference and to help the them measure progress.

Ideally visits to a farm take place twice a year, and for the Donner's this visit is the second one. "We appreciate all of the recommendations and help that Lyle and Harouna gave us when they were here for the dairy diagnostic and we look forward to having them back again in the future," says Marissa McWilliam-Donner. "It is nice to be able to have my previous professors willing to lend a hand and help us to further improve our operation."

To learn more about the Minnesota Dairy Initiative, visit www.mn-dairy-initiative.org.

The University of Minnesota Crookston now delivers 34 bachelor's degree programs, 22 minors, and 40 areas of emphasis on campus as well as 14 degree programs entirely online. These degrees are offered in the areas of agriculture and natural resources; business; liberal arts and education; and math, science and technology. With an enrollment of 1,800 undergraduates from more than 20 countries and 40 states, the Crookston campus offers a supportive, close-knit atmosphere that leads to a prestigious University of Minnesota degree. "Small Campus. Big Degree." To learn more, visit www.umcrookston.edu.

Top photo, left to right, Harouna Maiga, Karl Donner and Lyle Westrom.

Bottom photo, left to right, Karl Donner and Marissa McWilliam-Donner.

Contact

Elizabeth Tollefson

University Relations

218-281-8432

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2900 University Ave., Crookston, MN 56716
800-862-6466 | 218-281-6510 | umcinfo@umn.edu

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