

PA Milk Marketing Board
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Maintaining a Healthy Environment

Many years ago I was a high school teacher of agriculture, biology and chemistry. I always tried to have at least one aquarium in my classrooms because of the opportunity to assign work responsibilities and for the teaching moments that would arise periodically. We talked a lot about maintaining a healthy environment for the fish.

Recently, I received an aquarium kit as a present and, remembering those days in the classroom, I endeavored to put everything in place to secure that healthy environment I know is so important. Something went wrong and the water turned very cloudy – bacterial bloom I read – and I learned that as long as the pH and other chemical levels were as they should be, time would take care of the problem. I can see a lot of parallels to our current situation in the dairy industry.

The tangibles of the industry are easy to list: good feed for the cows, clean bedding, clean equipment on the farm and at the processing plant, proper temperature for the milk storage, and good handling practices once milk products leave the plant for retail sales. The intangibles are not so easy to define.

We think we have everything in place for the industry to operate as it should — farmers milk cows, processors create products, retailers offer the products for sale and the consumer buys things. Simple, right? It just doesn't work that way.

Dairy farmers in PA produce more milk than our consumers purchase so in order to sell their milk, their buyers must have outlets that go beyond the state; in fact, over 60% of PA-produced milk goes to other states. Surrounding states have cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese and other processing or manufacturing plants that use our milk in production. Many of our PA dairy processors ship their products out-of-state and, on top of that, consumption of fluid milk has declined sharply in the past 10 years, yet production has remained fairly stable, even increasing.

The COVID-19 pandemic was our “cloudy water environment” as it uncovered the frailties in our supply and demand chain. As we realized that the overwhelming number of American families were food insecure after missing only one or two paychecks, we also realized that even a few days' disruption in the milk pipeline would have devastating and long-term effects for some of our farmers and our processors; indeed, almost to the point of going out of business!

How do we prepare for this type of event in the future? How do we manage the current situation if it continues for many more months? What is the balance between a healthy economy and healthy citizenry? Unlike the aquarium environment, will time clear up the issues?

PMMB and Staff are prepared to work with other government agencies, advocacy organizations and our constituent groups to develop plans should we encounter “cloudy water” again. What did we put in place this time that worked, did not work well and needs to be tweaked for future use? How can we best help those producers, processors, cooperatives, retailers and others that

are impacted by disruptions in the milk supply chain deal with the disruptions? We will be looking closely at all of the bulletins, emails, changes and orders we produced in order to ensure that any future event is met in, hopefully, a proactive way.

Our office is still closed, and we continue to telework in order to maintain our desired service levels. The Board and Staff are committed to doing the best job we can.

PMMB is always available to respond to questions and concerns. I can be reached at 717-210-8244 or by email at chardbarga@pa.gov.