

Dairy Farms & the Environment

Fact Sheet

Most dairy farmers live and work on their farms, so it's important to them to protect the land, water and air for their families, surrounding communities and future generations. Environmental practices on all dairy farms are tightly regulated by both federal and state agencies. While requirements vary from state to state, most dairy farmers consistently meet or exceed these regulations.

Dairy farmers employ a wide range of environmentally sound practices, ranging from basic manure management programs to high-tech systems that convert cow manure to electricity.

Water Conservation

- Dairy farmers use water responsibly in their milking parlors and in manure management and storage. For example, wastewater is recycled to flush feed alleys and irrigate fields.
- One benefit of fertilizing the soil with cow manure is to help conserve water. When manure is used as a soil treatment, the water-holding capacity of soil is increased by 20 percent, resulting in reduced groundwater needed to grow crops.

Waste Management

- Larger-scale dairy farms are required to follow detailed manure recycling plans. These plans are continually updated to reflect new technologies.
- Every farm must abide by clean water laws. Farmers protect the water on and near their farms through a variety of practices to minimize potential runoff from their operations.
- Manure is spread on crop fields according to detailed nutrient management plans. These plans take into account the types of soil on the farm, the terrain of the fields, soil moisture levels, and the amount of nutrients the next crop on that field will need.
- The federal government offers incentives to help dairy farmers protect the water supply. For example, many farmers receive technical assistance when they upgrade their irrigation systems and manure storage facilities.
- New methane digester technology on some dairies converts manure into methane-rich biogas, a renewable fuel that can be used to generate electricity. Farms with this technology may generate more than enough electricity to run their operations, and they can sell the excess energy back to the local utility company.

Air Quality

- Dairy farmers protect air quality by following proper manure storage practices and maintaining clean facilities.
- When applying manure to their fields, farmers work to schedule around their neighbors' plans.
- University researchers and industry manufacturers continually work with dairy farmers to identify new ways to control odor.

Farm Management Practices

- Pesticides are used in farming to kill pests as well as to control weeds and fungus that may grow on crops. Many dairy farmers reduce the use of conventional pesticides through integrated pest management (IPM) programs which combine various techniques to keep flies and other pests at bay.
- While all farmers use certain fuels, oils, gases, paints, solvents and degreasers to maintain everyday farm operations, they work hard to properly store and dispose of these materials.

Dairy Farm Expansion

- Protecting the environment has more to do with proper management practices than the number of cows on the farm. Dairy farms, both big and small, consistently meet state and federal standards and work to minimize any impact their farms may have on the environment.
- Many dairy farmers, like other business owners, are modernizing and improving their efficiency in order to continue to support their families and meet increasing consumer demand for dairy products.
- Of the 65,000 dairy farms in America today, most are smaller farms with less than 200 cows. The vast majority of U.S. farms – big and small – are family owned and operated.

For more information or technical reference materials, contact National Milk Producers Federation (www.nmpf.org) or Dairy Management, Inc. (www.dairyfarmingtoday.org).