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## **FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative Focuses on Connecting with Consumers at Fifth Annual Meeting**

*Madison, Wis.* [February 21, 2017]—Members of FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative gathered for the fifth annual meeting held on February 10-11 in Wisconsin Dells, Wis. This year’s annual meeting theme was ‘Connecting and Engaging on Common Ground’ as the challenges that exist in the marketplace have become a top concern among dairy farmers everywhere.

“As more and more people become less directly connected with those that produce their food, they also forget the dedication of those farmers and what great care has gone into producing it,” says David Cooper, general manager of FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative. “While that is not the only challenge dairy farmers will face in the future, it’s certainly a common theme, and an area that all dairy farmers and consumers can come together on common ground.”

Before diving into the subject matter, the annual meeting kicked off on Friday afternoon with its Producer Discovery Workshops, first with Jaime Castaneda, Senior Vice President of Strategic Initiatives and Trade Policy, as he showcased the various key aspects of how U.S. dairy exports impact Midwest dairy producers’ bottom line, and the complexity of free trade agreements. Unfortunately, and fortunately, dairy products and other commodities are often affected in political negotiations and disagreements.

“For example, without the United States’ free trade agreement with Korea, U.S. cheese exports would be slapped with a 36% tariff while competitors could ship millions of pounds of cheese duty-free,” says Castaneda.

Following Jaime’s discussion on trade agreements and the value of exports, attendees then heard from a panel which was led by Mike Austin, radio and TV broadcaster for WFRV and WeAreGreenBay.com, as they discussed what it means to connect with consumers today. The panelists during this session featured Rae Nell Halbur, dairy farmer and farm broadcaster from KFIZ Radio, Sarah Hendren, the Nutrition and Quality Assurance Manager from Culver’s Franchising Inc., and Don Schindler, Senior Vice President of Digital Innovations at Dairy Management Inc.

“You’ve got to get out there and share your story,” says Schindler. “If you don’t, someone else will. In fact, someone else is already telling your story.”

Conversations carried into the evening banquet, where several staff and industry members were recognized for their commitment to the industry. Long-time staff members were also recognized for their dedication to the cooperative, including Pat Yeagle for 15 years, Norm Fleischman and Mike Payne for 20 years, and Rick Wolfe and Dan Zeleske for 30 years.

The last to be recognized was a special recognition, earning the title of Meritorious Service Award, which the cooperative recognizes special achievements by an individual within the dairy industry. Former U.S. House of Representative Reid Ribble of Wisconsin was recognized for his outstanding service, commitment and devotion to the dairy industry.

“One of the reasons I decided to leave Washington early prior to my four-term pledge was that many groups failed to see the larger picture and the impact that small changes can have,” noted Ribble. “As an industry and as an individual, you play a vital role in getting the right message to congressional leaders because taking people from an uninformed position to an informed position is critical.”

“Dairy producers have been very fortunate to have Reid Ribble take up several key issues that have positively impacted their farms, including legislation to withdraw from the Waters of the U.S. Interpretive Rule and represented dairy when geographical indicators first arose in TTIP,” says David Cooper. “We’re grateful for Reid’s intense focus to make these achievements happen while in office for only six years.”

Saturday’s business meeting continued the theme of ‘Connecting and Engaging on Common Ground’ as another panel featured leaders of the cooperative to share and discuss some of their top priorities, both as a cooperative member and as a dairy farmer. Members from the board, Districting & Resolutions Committee and the Young Cooperator program shared their wishes, top priorities and honest opinions about what it means to be dairy farming in the future.

By no coincidence, among their top concerns was sharing information to consumers about what dairy farmers do.

“Really, what people want, is information. They want to know why it is what we do, what we’re doing, how come we do it that way, and they’re just looking for a source they can trust and believe,” says Mike Leahy, Young Cooperator Vice-Chair.

When there are negative comments made, it is important to address them, politely and professionally.

“Someone made a negative comment on one of our farm Facebook page, and we were able to use that as a platform to share the many ways we care for our cows so that they can flourish, including nutrition, cow comfort and technology,” says Janet Clark, Young Cooperator Chair. “Had they not made their comment, I might not have ever had that conversation with them.”

The business meeting also included guest speaker, Paul Bleiberg, providing his unique perspective on serving as a legislative aide in a Congressional leader’s office to being on the other side, now working as part of a national dairy organization, the National Milk Producers Federation.

“No voice is more trusted than yours as a constituent, speaking to the challenges you face as an actual dairy farmer. New policies can make a positive difference, and much of that begins with hearing from the source – you, the dairy farmer,” says Bleiberg.

The annual business meeting also recognized a few of the 2016 FarmFirst scholarship recipients, including Roseanne Crave of Waterloo, Wis., Bethany Granskog of Stephenson, Mich., and Kristyn Nigon of Greenwood, Wis. Young Cooperator Chair Janet Clark and Vice-Chair Mike Leahy were also recognized during Saturday's business meeting for their quality work and national recognition at NMPF's Communication Competition back in October of 2016.

FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative was established in 2013 and is based in Madison, Wis. The cooperative represents farms in Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana through policy bargaining, dairy marketing services, laboratory testing opportunities and industry promotion. Learn more about FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative by visiting: [www.FarmFirstDairyCooperative.com](http://www.FarmFirstDairyCooperative.com).

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