

Oakhurst Dairy: Taking on the Carbon Challenge

by Stanley T. Bennett II

In most conversations about milk, the subject of “global warming” rarely comes up. We all know that milk is good for us, but at Oakhurst Dairy, we want to be sure our milk business is good for the environment as well. Oakhurst has a long tradition of environmental stewardship. In 2004, when Governor Baldacci began his voluntary program to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, Oakhurst began to look even more closely at its impact on the environment. The goal of the Governor’s Carbon Challenge is to encourage organizations to develop strategies to reduce direct emissions from on-site fuel combustion and company-owned vehicles, as well as indirect sources including purchased electricity. Oakhurst was one of the first Maine firms to participate in the campaign.

By far the largest single source of heat-trapping gases linked to global warming from milk production is farm emissions, which contribute roughly 10 pounds of CO₂ per gallon of milk. Eighty-five percent of those emissions come from one source: the cow. Researchers are working on changes in feed formulas to reduce these emissions.

Meanwhile, there are steps the industry can take to affect the remaining emissions related to commercial milk production. Oakhurst partnered with Clean Air-Cool Planet, a non-profit organization focused on global warming issues, to identify opportunities for CO₂ reduction within its operations. Specifically, the company targeted its transportation and production processes. With the help of Clean Air-Cool Planet, Oakhurst calculated its 1998 carbon footprint as the

baseline. From there, the company set a goal of a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2010. The partnership with Clean Air-Cool Planet has led to a number of successful initiatives that are helping Oakhurst to operate a greener, more efficient business and meet its carbon reduction goals. These include the following:

Increasing truck fleet efficiency—The company purchased rerouting software to reduce travel time and fuel consumption by its delivery fleet, helping to reduce CO₂ emissions and to hold the line on rising energy costs. In the first year of software use, the company reduced its purchases of diesel by 88,000 gallons.

“Green” plant expansion—When the time came to expand the Portland processing plant, a number of energy-efficiency and conservation projects were integrated in a multimillion-dollar project that included insulated cold tanks and a hot-water recovery system.

Switching to biodiesel—Working with Clean Air-Cool Planet, the company calculated that switching from diesel to B20 (a 20 percent soy/80 percent petroleum blend), could reduce annual fleet emissions by 1,332 tons while simultaneously cutting dependence on foreign oil. More than 100 box trucks and tractors were converted to biodiesel without any modifications, becoming one of the largest private biodiesel fleets in New England.

Solar energy installation—Milk processing requires large quantities of hot water for pasteurization and cleaning. Recently, Oakhurst became home to one of the largest commercial solar thermal systems in the Northeast with the installation of 75 panels, approximately 2,500 square feet, on the roof of the company’s Portland headquarters. When the sun is shining, the panels preheat domestic water, which reduces the consumption of heating oil by between 6,000 and 8,000 gallons per year.

Oakhurst is continuing to investigate technologies that will reduce the company's carbon footprint and help milk suppliers to do the same. For example, the company is beginning a program to help family farms that produce Oakhurst milk to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels through the use of solar energy. Oakhurst also plans to enlarge its own solar installation to meet future needs.

These efforts are long-term investments in the sustainability of Oakhurst's business and the health of our communities—and the planet. They are also core to the mission and values of our family-owned dairy. We recommend that all businesses, large or small, look at their direct impact and strive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent. 🐄



Stanley T. Bennett II is a third generation dairyman. He joined the family business in 1973 and is currently chairman of the board of directors, president and chief executive office of Oakhurst Dairy. His involvement in industry associations includes the boards of the New England Milk Dealers Association, the International Dairy Foods Association, and the Maine Dairy and Nutrition Council.