

MN Dairy Growth Alliance elects new leaders

Schlangen, Becker to serve as chairman, vice chairman

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The Minnesota Dairy Growth Alliance (DGA), established as one of the outcomes from the Minnesota Dairy Growth Summit held in February of 2015, now has new leadership.

During the group's April 20 meeting, the 15-person committee elected Steve Schlangen as chairman, along with Joe Becker as the vice chairman. Both are dairy producers — Schlangen, who milks cows near Albany, Minn., and Becker, who milks cows near Eden Valley, Minn.

"I am honored to be serving as chair of the Minnesota Dairy Growth Alliance Steering Committee, along with Joe as vice chair. It's been exciting to come together and collaborate with dairy leaders from across the state. We all want to see Minnesota's dairy industry succeed, and we know that we are stronger together as we work to make that happen," Schlangen said.

The 15-person committee consists of five dairy farmer members who represent five dairy co-ops: Schlangen representing AMPI; Becker representing First District Association; Mark Berning from St. Michael, representing Land O'Lakes; Kristine Spadgenske from Menahga or Steve Matthees from Goodhue, representing Dairy Farmers of America; and Brent Ziegler from Green Isle, representing Bongards' Creamery. Five more of the committee members are management or staff people from those same five dairy co-ops: Donn DeVelder or Sheryl Meshke from AMPI, Keith Grove from Bongards' Creamery, Clint Fall from First District Association, Bill Neary from Land O'Lakes and Randy McGinnis from Dairy Farmers of America. Also on the board are dairy farmers Pat Lunemann from Clarissa, representing

Minnesota Milk Producers Association, and Ken Herbranson from Clitherall, representing Midwest Dairy Association. The last three committee members are at-large positions and all three are dairy farmers: Kindra Carlson from Pennock; Sadie Frericks from Melrose; and Mitch Fehr from Morris.

"They (the three at-large committee members) were chosen as people with passion for the industry, who also have a desire to educate and be the next generation of leaders," said Marin Bozic, assistant professor of applied economics at the University of Minnesota.

Bozic serves as the facilitator of the group. "My role in this process is to set up the structure and then pull back and let the producers really take over as they are now doing," Bozic said.

Schlangen said the DGA's goal is to help facilitate the growth of the state's dairy industry.

"We've figured out this is one of the best places in the country to produce milk and milk production growth is shifting back to the Midwest. This committee will help encourage that growth and do some things to make it easier and more attainable for producers and processors," Schlangen said.

Along with electing new leadership at the most recent meeting, the DGA met with Midwest Dairy Association's new CEO, Lucas Lentsch, and reviewed the "A Path Forward" study. The soon-to-be completed phase two of "A Path Forward" encourages growth to meet demand in the cheese market. The group discussed what would be done for phase three — analysis of milk fat — and about building a database of processing capacity in the region.

"We'll try to see which processors are building and how much space there is for expansion in Minnesota that could present opportunity in the future. We're trying to figure out what will happen over the next few years," Bozic said.

Most processors are at or near capacity, which does not leave a lot of room for growth, Bozic said. The group wants to change that.

"If we want to have a vibrant dairy community and have the opportunity for our dairy families to stay in the business and thrive and bring in the new generation, we have to give them conditions in which they can grow. That's the growth part of the [Minnesota] Dairy Growth Alliance," Bozic said.

The DGA also talked about creating a new report that highlights the economic, environmental and social benefits of dairy in the state of Minnesota. Schlangen said they plan to work with the University of Minnesota, Midwest Dairy Association and Minnesota Milk Producers Association to make that happen. Bozic said the report should be ready by the end of the summer.

Despite the current low milk price, Schlangen is looking forward to the future of the dairy industry, citing expected growing domestic and global demand for dairy products.

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STEVE SCHLANGEN, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

"I've been in the dairy business for nearly 30 years. During that time we've experienced good times and bad. At the end of the day, we need to be competitive on our farms and in our plants — producing milk and making products for consumers to enjoy. We also need federal policies that provide a meaningful safety net for dairy farmers and a level playing field when it comes to international trade opportunities," Schlangen said.

As chairman of the DGA, he hopes he can keep his home state's dairy industry going in the right direction.



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