Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (CAFE)

CAFE in Idaho

Idaho agriculture continues to be an important part of the state’s economy, with substantial value added to agricultural commodities through a robust food processing industry. Idaho is the third-largest producer of milk in the United States. The state’s cheese and yogurt plants cater to regional and national markets, and milk protein concentrate is traded all over the world. Efficient agricultural production that also protects Idaho’s natural resources and the environment requires research-based information to succeed.

The Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (CAFE), announced in January 2017, is envisioned as a consortium of universities, government agencies, private-sector representatives and NGOs led by the University of Idaho (UI) that serves as a catalyst for research, outreach and education to advance sustainability of dairy/livestock production and food processing in Idaho. University leaders anticipate that CAFE will also collaborate closely with the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS), likely housing some of their scientists in the center’s labs.

CAFE will have a physical location in the Twin Falls area. This proposed $45 million facility will provide space for university faculty and staff as well as collaborators and house research laboratories and classrooms. This facility will be the United States’ largest research dairy, operating on a scale typical of dairies in the West. CAFE also will address critical nutrient management and sustainability challenges. Researchers will interact with food processors, and CAFE may be expanded by adding a food processing pilot plant.

CAFE will be a leader in addressing constraints on water usage and environmental quality while supporting the agricultural sectors of dairy, livestock and cropland, as well as the food processing industries.

Background

The dairy industry has changed dramatically over the past 70 years. It produces more milk with fewer cows, and those animals consume less feed and water per liter of milk produced. The number of cows per farm has increased, and more dairy cows are now found in the West, with the greatest increases in California and Idaho. Environmental health and public opinion are also becoming increasingly important.

Economic studies show that food production and processing form a strong foundation for the Idaho tax base, contributing $2.2 billion to Idaho’s gross state product. As many as 51,000 Idaho jobs can be linked to Idaho’s dairy industry. The expansion of Idaho’s dairy industry during the past decade has drawn increased food processing activity.

In 2015, U.S. dairies produced 209 billion pounds of milk. U.S. dairy exports were more than $5 billion in 2015, generating more than 120,000 jobs, according to the U.S. Dairy Export Council.
Recent Accomplishments

- Idaho Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter included CAFE in his Jan. 9, 2017, State of the State address. The governor recommended that the state this year invest $10 million in the center, with a potential $5 million to follow in 2018. UI and other partners will identify funding for the rest of the project. Idaho’s dairy, food processing, and livestock industries have already expressed considerable interest and potential investment in the facility.

- Research already underway at UI is assisting dairies to become more sustainable while simultaneously developing information that will assist in the growth of this industry. Research topics include water quality and quality, dairy systems modeling and creating value-added products, such as pathogen-free fiber, recovered chemicals and bio-plastics.

- UI trains future dairy and related industry employees through degree programs such as dairy foods management, dairy science and sustainable food systems. An educated workforce is critical to the sustained success of dairies and livestock operations and the associated food processing industries.

Upcoming Goals

CAFE promises to deliver research and education that will support a sustainable future for Idaho’s dairies, livestock operations and food processing industries. This will require continuing investments and strategic partnerships. Priorities for future research and education include:

- Efficient water use in dairy operations
- Restoration of watersheds suffering from nutrient overload from dairies and other agricultural operations
- Increased dairy profitability through improved business planning, animal-care practices, digester technology for waste reduction and energy production, and opportunities for bio-refining
- Understanding soil and animal health relations with dairy operations
- Understanding land-use, water and air regulations associated with Western dairies
- Modeling large-dairy sustainability as a function of key social, environmental and economic variables
- Technology-based economic development to support private-sector investment and federal loan guarantees for sustainable dairy industry practices
- Education of the workforce to support all sectors of this agricultural enterprise.

Projected Impact of Continued and Increased Funding

Agriculture drives Idaho’s economy and helps make the state a leader in the food processing industry. Given Idaho’s educational needs, combined with the rise in job opportunities afforded though the expansion of the food processing sector, the timing for CAFE is critical to the state.

Accounts: Future funding may come from Agriculture appropriations, ARS or AFRI; EPA

For more information, please contact:

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