



## Career and Professional Development

Whether you are new to farming or have been in the field for the better part of a lifetime, professional development is critical to your ongoing success. Fortunately, there are a wide range of options and resources available for you to consider and utilize in expanding your skills and knowledge.

One of the most important things you can do for your ongoing development is to spend time with colleagues. We all know that one of the challenges of farming is that running a farm takes so much time that finding mornings, evenings, or other moments to take a break and meet with fellow farmers can be difficult, especially beyond the borders of your immediate community.

The Penn State University Extension serving each county is a resource that serves both as a clearinghouse for farming practices and ideas, but also offers educators who can meet with you personally and keep you informed.

### For Those New to Farming

If you are new to farming, consider a number of programs and resources that can help you get started on the right footing. The Center for Farm Transitions can provide you with guidance and information as you begin planning your entry into farming. In addition, a number of colleges and technical schools throughout the Commonwealth – including Delaware Valley College, University of Pittsburgh Farm Innovation Center, Harrisburg Area Community College and other community colleges and the Penn State System – offer formal certificate, associate, and bachelor degree programs.

Some of the topics you should cover in your new farmer education and development include:

- Agriculture economics
- Farm management
- Land use and conservation

- Herd management
- Crop planning
- Farm finance
- Farming and the law
- Agricultural product marketing
- Negotiation and business agreements

In addition to these areas of knowledge, technical skills are critical and should include:

- Use of farm equipment
- Management of farm materials
- Farm safety and emergency first aid
- Manure management
- Environmental planning

## **Continuing Your Growth**

The Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, as well as other farm related associations, is an excellent resource to connect with as you continue your professional development and growth. Networking with other farmers, attending professional workshops, and pursuing other opportunities to better understand the changes impacting your field – these are all valuable next steps.

One struggle farmers face when dedicating time to engagements outside the farm is that it becomes hard to balance professional development with protective advocacy. We live in an era in which almost monthly, new legislation is introduced at the state or federal levels that can directly impact your business. From land use restrictions to environmental controls, and from the federal farm bill to organic labeling requirements – there is so much to keep track of and advocate about in order to protect your ongoing business.

These are undoubtedly critical issues and time spent on them is invaluable to you and fellow farmers. However, your first priority should remain on how you can enhance your farm business and make it more productive and competitive.

## **Pursuing New Directions**

One area in which you can focus your time dedicated to professional development is in market development and product marketing. The farming field has change

dramatically in the last ten years from an almost exclusively commodity-based model, into a sector where more and more opportunities exist for farmers to:

- Market products directly to the public
- Pursue new forms of cooperative agreements
- Develop viable farm-related secondary businesses
- Create agritourism experiences that can add income

Learning about these possibilities could be highly valuable to your ongoing business growth plans. In addition to your Extension, other resources and services that can help you learn about these options include economic development districts, rural service agencies, and – for those interested in organic or sustainable practices – as an example, the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA).

### **For Dairy Farmers**

In Pennsylvania, dairy farmers face enormous opportunities and significant challenges as they plan for the future. To help encourage the growth and advancement of dairy farmers individually and at the business level, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has created the Center for Dairy Excellence (CDE). The Center provides consulting, training, and resources specifically targeted at helping dairy farmers compete through greater efficiency, improved operating strategies, herd management, quality control, and other possibilities that can increase yield volume and quality.

Areas of expertise offered by the CDE and its team members and consultants include:

Risk management  
Financial management  
Value-added strategies  
Yield and profit improvement  
Government relations and programs

In addition, dairy farmers can apply to work with a Dairy Profit Team consisting of colleagues and professionals who will work collaboratively with the farmer to plan and implement changes designed specifically to improve farm profitability and sustainability.

Another key resource for dairy farmers is the Dairy Advocacy and Resource Team (DART) which convenes quarterly regional meetings of dairy farmers who work together on industry issues, business planning, skills training, and more.

For more information on resources for dairy farmers, visit the Center for Dairy Excellence online at [www.agriculture.state.pa.us/cde](http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us/cde).

## **Outside Employment: Opportunity for Growth**

One of the most difficult decisions facing a majority of farmers is how to balance the common need for income from outside employment with the demands and attention that can best be given to their farm by focusing on the farm business full-time.

Since a high percentage of farm families rely on outside income through one or more full-time jobs in the farm household, one way to address this is to look for opportunities for employment that will help the farm business and enhance professional development.

Every farm relies on a group of experts – from veterinarians and feedstock suppliers, to equipment maintenance contractors, ag lending officers, and yield management teams. Having a member of the family working in one of these farm-support fields can help you become more adept at understanding current trends, technologies, or solutions – and allow your farm family to see firsthand what others are doing, as well as what works...and what doesn't.

From milking parlor design to manure management technology, and from crop rotation patterns to environmental enhancements – there is plenty to be gained from developing additional expertise in any one of these fields through outside employment.

In addition, outside employment in a related field can help you maintain a healthy perspective on your farm as a business. Seeing your farm 'from the outside' may allow you to more readily perceive opportunities for growth; weaknesses in your present operation; and areas of potential improvement, that you might not otherwise identify.

One of the greatest benefits of farming is that it is a lifestyle choice. Your farm becomes your life, and your life – to a large extent – becomes your farm. In many ways, that is a wonderful value that most farmers will consistently say they cherish at heart. However, a farm is still, first and foremost, a business – and any idea you can gain from outside experience that will help you become more successful at running that business, will ultimately contribute to your peace, security, and satisfaction in farm life.