



Women in Leadership



Their voices, ideas and vision for the future of cheese and dairy.

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is CEO of Midwest Dairy

In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among those in your organization?

The hard-working men and women who fund checkoff work as dairy farmers. Their dairy farm stories inspire me. Dairy farmers are top of my mind every day. Knowing how hard they work to produce milk that feeds and nourishes the world is a daily inspiration to deliver promotion and research programs that make a difference for them. The board members at Midwest Dairy, in particular, are very good at providing strategic direction in their roles. They provide strategic direction by challenging assumptions, offering advice and providing input at the beginning of the process and as the work progresses. I owe my career to the dairy farm families in our 10-state region.

Is there a marketing campaign or other program/service at Midwest Dairy you were involved with launching that you're particularly proud of?

I have had the pleasure of participating in many important projects within checkoff. I am most proud of creating the metrics scorecard developed at Midwest Dairy over the last four years. This scorecard helps communicate the impact of the checkoff investment to the dairy farmer clearly and concisely. I have always believed checkoff is farmer-led. We acted to create the scorecard when the Midwest Dairy board of directors challenged us to develop a tool to convey how checkoff delivers results. The tool has inspired other dairy checkoff organizations as well, and we will continue to improve the scorecard as we learn how best to communicate results to farmers with greater transparency.

Do you feel female leadership is well-reflected on the boards of dairy organizations like Midwest Dairy?

At Midwest Dairy, any farmer who pays into checkoff qualifies to run for a board position. I commend those who

get involved and am always supportive of any woman who wants to join a board at the state and corporate level. Over my time at Midwest Dairy, I have seen many phenomenal women hold board positions and a slight increase in female participation. In the Midwest dairy industry, females have always stepped up to the leadership plate. Over the last five years, we have seen a 2.8% increase in female board members. For example, in 2019, there were 36 female board members, and in 2023, we welcomed 37. Between the 10-state region, Minnesota and Iowa have seen the most female board participation increase. Minnesota increased from 45% in 2013, and in 2023, we have seen a 70% female board increase. Iowa also saw an increase. We saw a 5% increase in 2013 to a 26% increase in female board participants in 2023.

Today, in the current division board structure, 31% is made up of strong female board members.

What do you feel are some of the most important qualities of a successful leader?

While a successful leader has many qualities, perhaps the top two are linked — being curious and being a good listener. If you're curious, you'll ask questions to learn more and truly listen to the answers you receive. Being open as a leader to finding a better way forward is part of this. The added benefit of being curious is that you learn more about the people you're working with — both inside and outside of work. That, in turn, builds relationships, provides a foundation of gratitude for what others are bringing to the table and builds trust.

How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy?

Midwest Dairy has created and implemented programs that offer many industry opportunities to young leaders, including women. The Dairy Experience and Agricultural Leadership program (DEAL) is an excellent example of this effort, as half of DEAL Classes 1 and 2 were made up of women. This leadership program is for young dairy farmers from across Midwest Dairy's 10-state region, consisting of an 18-month program that provides an opportunity to gain a deep understanding of the dairy checkoff, learn how to engage consumers, conduct media interviews,

and network with industry leaders and peers — ultimately making you and your farm more marketable within the industry and to consumers. I have seen this group go on different adventures and truly step out of their comfort zones to learn and grow, and Midwest Dairy is eager to conclude the search for DEAL Class 3 this winter. As I think about the DEAL program and the amazing young people who have participated, many outstanding females come to mind. I am also happy to say that this program has since been adopted by checkoff nationwide. Others will use this program as a blueprint to start their own. This effort makes me incredibly proud, as I like to see Midwest Dairy sharing ideas with other checkoffs to make our industry stronger as a whole. This program will give more young dairy leaders, including females, the opportunity to get involved and grow within the industry.

Midwest Dairy also encourages young female participation through our ambassador programs, internships and princess programs.

Do you believe the cheese/dairy industry as a whole is supportive of women?

Dairy is a special sector of the agriculture industry when it comes to women in agriculture. Not only are 33% of dairy farmers women, but this industry truly is a family affair, and I have seen many females of all ages working hard and contributing to the operation. But the industry comprises more than those who already have deep roots within it. I think of an intern Midwest Dairy had this year, an inquisitive college student who came from an equine background but found a love for the industry in college when she joined the campus dairy club. Since then, she has followed her passion with plans to pursue a career in the dairy industry upon graduation. I have also seen different dairy princesses stand up and tell their stories of getting involved in the industry through a neighbor who allowed them to show their dairy cattle at the local county fair, thus getting them involved and instilling a love for all things dairy. After 40 years in this industry, I can think of so many examples of women getting a start in the industry, and I have found that if you have a love for this industry, you can find a place in it.

I also think about the women the dairy industry is trying to reach. For example, new parents, as we rely on the impact of a teachable moment by supplying information to pregnant

women who are beginning to think about nutrition as they pay closer attention to feeding themselves and their unborn child. Checkoff also works hard to be sure health professionals have the most up-to-date dairy nutrition information as they share how to consume dairy with all ages of females in all walks of life. I have seen checkoff research go above and beyond for females, whether they realize it or not.

What is a key industry insight you'd share with yourself 10 years ago if you could?

There are many things I could share with myself; growth is such an important part of life. A big one that sticks out to me has to do with reaching consumers, which should be no surprise as that is a big goal of the dairy checkoff. Over the years, I have learned that to stay relevant with consumers, dairy will need to attract talented and skilled people, particularly in the area of food science and marketing. We have to be louder and prouder of dairy in the nutritional powerhouse category to draw in new talent by showcasing dairy as a solution to nourishing people with care for the planet. We have two critical things working for us. One, dairy checkoff has years of scientific research that stands behind dairy's unique nutritional profile, and two, our farmers bring generations of animal welfare and sustainability practices to the table. When we pair nutrition and sustainability together, that says a lot, in my opinion.

Who are some dairy industry leaders who inspire you? Did you have any mentors in the industry, and how have they helped you along your career journey?

I've been blessed to work with so many amazing leaders in my career with dairy checkoff. This includes staff members and dairy farmers who have provided support and guidance along the way. I have learned so much from so many! Naming one individual is hard, but if pressed, I've been inspired by Barb O'Brien, CEO of Dairy Management Inc. She brings to the table the leadership quality of listening, and I appreciate when she takes time to listen to many views and then makes decisions explaining the rationale behind her choice. Listening and communicating are so powerful! CMN