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## Dairy

# Organic Valley co-op eyes carbon neutrality

## Carbon Insetting Program incentivizes climate-smart farming

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

ST. PAUL, Ore. — Organic Valley, the largest organic dairy cooperative, is establishing incentives for climate-smart agricultural practices at members' farms.

The co-op has set a goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

Rather than achieving that goal by purchasing carbon offset credits from elsewhere, the co-op's new Carbon Insetting Program aims to generate carbon savings from within, directly benefiting local producers and the communities they serve.

"I like to think of it as the opposite of carbon offsets," said Nicole Rakobitsch, director of sustainability for Organic Valley. "We're going to invest in farmer-members in our supply chain who produce the milk and other products we put on (store) shelves."

The announcement was made March 11 during a panel of climate experts, farmers and food brands at Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, Calif. Rakobitsch said

Organic Valley expects to be the first major dairy brand to reduce farm emissions without relying on carbon offsets.

"We will be providing a direct incentive from the co-op to the farmer who is installing a new practice," she said.

Organic Valley represents approximately 1,700 dairy farmers in 34 states, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. That includes about 25 farms in Oregon.

For the Carbon Insetting Program's first year, Rakobitsch said Organic Valley hopes to enroll 30-50 new projects.

Eligible practices are broken down into three categories: energy, improve manure management and agroforestry.

Energy projects can include anything that improves overall efficiency or reduces consumption — such as installing LED lighting or upgrading plate coolers for milk.

The category also covers renewable energy, such as installing solar panels, and on-farm electrification, such as investing in electric tractors and other equipment.

Improving manure management specifically refers to tech-



**Nicole Rakobitsch**



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Dairy cows at Sar-Ben Farms in St. Paul, Ore. The Organic Valley cooperative will pay farmers for modifications they make to their operations that reduce their carbon footprint.**

nology that separates liquid and solid manure typically stored in open-air lagoons, Rakobitsch said. The more solids can be removed and used as fertilizer or in compost, the less chance it has to break down and emit methane, a harmful greenhouse gas.

Finally, agroforestry is the practice of planting trees around or among pastures and cropland to help sequester carbon. Practically for dairies, tree plantings could be done to provide shade for cows, or as windbreaks for crops.

While the focus of the program is to help achieve carbon neutrality, Rakobitsch said they come with a suite of environmental co-benefits, including enhanced

soil health, air quality, water quality and biodiversity.

"Carbon insetting is about so much more than simply reducing a company's carbon footprint," she said. "It is about businesses investing in the ecosystems their suppliers and farmers depend on to increase their resiliency and provide significant, measurable benefits to communities surrounding the value chain."

Rakobitsch said the co-op is working with SustainCERT, a third-party firm, to certify carbon savings from individual practices.

Though prices continue to fluctuate, Rakobitsch said Organic Valley is trying to be competitive with other carbon offset markets

that offer around \$15 per metric ton of carbon.

Enrollment in the Carbon Insetting Program will likely take place later this summer. As part of the deal, Rakobitsch said the farmers must agree not to enter any external carbon offset markets "to ensure there's not a double-counting of that same carbon."

Steve Pierson, Organic Valley board president and fourth-generation owner of Sar-Ben Farms in St. Paul, Ore., said his family operation will be among the first to enroll in the program.

Pierson plans to install a new, more efficient separator to pull solid manure from the waste generated by the farm's 320 dairy cows. The manure solids can then be composed and sold as organic fertilizer.

"This is definitely a more efficient system than what we had," Pierson said. "It will reduce up to 20-25% more solids than our old system did."

There is no question agriculture contributes greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, Pierson said, though he added farmers can and should be part of the solution.

"Our co-op is trying to do exactly that, by incentivizing our farmers to reduce our sources opportunities for emissions," he said.

## National Milk expects a busy year

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

Election years can sometimes be quiet on Capitol Hill, but leaders of the National Milk Producers Federation think this year won't be one of them.

There's still a lot of sausage making that goes on even in an election year, Paul Bleiburg, NMPF's senior vice president of government relations, said.

Congress just passed a \$1.5 trillion spending bill that will support some of NMPF's priorities, he said during the latest "Dairy Defined" podcast.

One relates to National Milk's climate and sustainability efforts to become greenhouse gas neutral or better by 2050. Part of

that is reducing enteric emission, which can represent 30% of a dairy farmer's greenhouse gas profile, he said.

National Milk and other agriculture organizations have urged FDA to reclassify how it approves animal feed additives to reduce enteric emissions from livestock, he said.

"We were able to get new funding as well as language in this recent bill to provide direction to FDA to look at how they might classify these additives as foods rather than drugs, to expedite their approval, get them to market more quickly ...," he said.

In addition, the bill continues funding for a number of National Milk's priorities, including the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network and Dairy Business Innovation Initiatives, he said.

## Risk management a priority in farm bill negotiations

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

With the 2018 Farm Bill expiring on Sept. 30, 2023, the U.S. House Agriculture Committee has a lot to do to get up to speed on hearings and listening sessions.

It's only had three sessions, compared with 130 at this point in the process for the last farm bill. A big part of the delay has been the COVID-19 pandemic, said Rep. Glen "G.T." Thompson, R-Pa., ranking member of the committee.

He would put risk management at the top of the priority list in information-gathering sessions for the next farm bill, he said during National Cattlemen's Beef Association's latest "Beltway Beef" podcast.

"One of the biggest areas of growth in the federal crop insurance program has been in the livestock area," he said.

The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 lifted the cap on the amount of livestock insurance that could be sold. Prior to that, the government only insured about \$500 million in liability on livestock policies. This year alone, the government is going to insure \$13 billion, he said.

"We got to make sure all these risk-management tools remain available for livestock producers," he said.



**Rep. Glenn "G.T." Thompson**

there that do not understand agriculture. There will no doubt be amendments that will try to negatively impact crop insurance, he said.

"I want to be able to defeat those motions, amendments that will be offered in a huge way," he said.

One of the areas of the committee's pace on farm bill oversight that frustrates him most is animal disease. There's avian flu in the Mid-Atlantic states and African swine fever in the Dominican Republic.

"Certainly with the spread of those two, animal health is — and certainly has to be — top of mind as we enter into the next farm bill negotiations," he said.

He's proud of the work the committee did on establishing the Foot and Mouth Disease vaccine bank, but it would be good to have an oversight hearing on how it's going and how prepared the U.S. is for an outbreak, he said.

He also talked about legislative efforts to provide more

information on cattle markets and proposals to mandate a certain amount of negotiated cash trade in fed cattle.

"As a conservative who generally believes in free markets, I'm always in favor of private industry-led solutions. ... When the government gets involved, you have to always be worried about unintended consequences," he said.

When the affected industry doesn't quite agree on the problem or the extent of the problem, it becomes even more difficult to find the solution by way of a government program or mandate, he said.

"With a mandate, we'd probably have more unintended negative consequences than the positive intended consequences," he said.

That's why he was pleased to see the industry as a whole coalesce around the cattle contract library passed in the House and included in the omnibus bill.

"It's not 'the' silver bullet, but it's a great tool to put in the toolbox," he said.

The committee has worked well together on the contract library, a rural broadband bill and WHIP+ (Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus) disaster funding, and has the capacity to continue to do great bipartisan work on behalf of agriculture and rural America, he said.



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