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LANCASTER COUNTY DAIRY PRODUCER DISCUSSES AGRITOURISM AND ON-FARM EVENTS IN NEW PODCAST EPISODE

Maria Forry Was Interviewed in the New Episode of “Cow-Side Conversations”

Harrisburg, Pa. – In the Center for Dairy Excellence’s latest episode of the [“Cow-Side Conversations” podcast](#), Maria Forry, a dairy producer from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, shared how Oregon Dairy Farm LLC’s annual event – Family Farm Days – reaches up to 10,000 people each year. Throughout the podcast episode, Maria described the planning process, the importance of connecting with consumers, the partnerships they have formed within the community to make the event successful, and why this type of agritourism event makes an impact for production agriculture. She also discussed the multiple enterprises and revenue streams on her family’s dairy operation, including custom cropping, a methane digester, and bottling milk.

Maria opened the podcast by sharing the history of her family’s dairy farm and how it has evolved over the years. Her grandparents bought the farm in 1952, and in the mid 1970s, her dad worked with her grandparents to build the first Oregon Dairy store to sell their milk directly to customers. In 1979, they expanded the store to a full-line grocery store. In 1980, her dad purchased the home farm, and Maria came back to work full-time on the farm with her husband in 2000. Three years later, they formed the Oregon Dairy Farm LLC with her dad, husband, younger brother and herself in partnership. After expanding to around 500 cows over the years, they decided to adjust their business model in 2019 to downsize their herd, currently milking approximately 50 cows and farming about 900 acres.

“We decided to downsize with the volatility of the dairy industry. Even though the industry was really struggling at that time, selling milk from 500 cows was still a source of income [for us]. So we had to look at how we were going to make up that revenue,” Maria said in the podcast. “We are in really old facilities, so it was either make a huge investment in a new milking parlor and freestall barn or change our business structure and go a different route. We decided to downsize the herd and keep 50 cows because of having the Oregon Dairy grocery store. We wanted to continue to provide milk for customers.”

Maria and her family also use their land base to sell crops, manage a seed dealership for channel seed, and perform custom farm work. They continue to sell their milk to the Oregon Dairy grocery store, where it gets bottled and processed right at the market.

With both the grocery store and dairy farm working closely together, Maria and her family have a unique opportunity to connect with consumers in their community. Roughly five miles north of the heart of Lancaster city, the farm is situated in a relatively suburban area. For over 30 years, they have hosted Family Farm Days where families can take a wagon ride from the Oregon Dairy grocery store to the dairy farm for family-friendly activities.

“The event has evolved over the years. In the late 80s and early 90s, our Lancaster Chamber of Commerce had an ag committee and were very involved in this event and wanted to see it grow. They came on board as partners to plan it,” Maria explained. “That’s when it started to grow with the exhibitors that are here and securing sponsorships so it can stay free for the general public to come see the farm. There is a team of people who bring ideas to the table and then flesh those out.”

For the 2022 Family Farm Days that were held in mid-June, Maria estimates that between 8,000 and 10,000 people attended the event. Volunteers and tour guides answer questions about the dairy farm and talk about how the cows are cared for and how much they eat and drink. Exhibitors and agriculture businesses from the community participate in the event with interactive displays and food samples. Families and kids also enjoy straw tunnels, corn bins, pedal tractors, horse rides, a stream study from the Lancaster Conservation District, and other educational activities.

“When a child gets to pet a calf, it’s amazing. They’re just wide-eyed. People don’t have these opportunities, and for those of us who live on the farm, I know I took it for granted for many years. It’s a real privilege to be able to open the doors so other people can have these learning experiences,” Maria added.

Maria says it takes about 85 volunteers per day to make the event happen. Individuals from all of production agriculture come together to give their time and connect with consumers, including other farmers, representatives from ag businesses, ag support organizations, farm equipment dealerships, feed companies, seed companies, and banks and insurance agencies.

“When we talk about Family Farm Days, we look at it from a bigger perspective – not just for our farm. It’s a positive experience for all of production agriculture. With so many people being disconnected from farming, it’s so important to allow people to be on the farm, to see animals up close, and to see where [their food] comes from,” Maria shared. “If one person can learn one little detail about farming and production agriculture, that’s what makes it all worth it. Hopefully they are telling their friends as well. Anytime we can give one nugget of truth to dispel the misconceptions that are out there, that’s what makes it all worth it.”

During the podcast, Maria also discussed some of the challenges of planning on-farm events, including finding volunteers in the midst of staffing shortages and securing liability protection.

“Something that’s always in the back of your head is liability. Whenever you invite someone on to your farm, you pray for a safe event and hope all your volunteers are committed to keeping people safe. But something can always happen,” she said. “We’re fortunate in Pennsylvania that a law was recently passed for liability protection for farmers who host events like this. To

be able to get that liability protection, there are some steps we had to take with signage and tickets.”

She also shared advice with other farmers who might be considering hosting an agritourism event on their farm.

“I recommend starting small. We didn’t start with 10,000 people. We started out with a couple hundred. For me, it’s more about the quality of the experience than the quantity of the people coming to the farm,” Maria shared. “Think about what it is that you’d like your guests to learn, and think about the structure and layout of your farm. Keep safety a number one priority for the guests who come and the volunteers you have.”

To listen to the full podcast interview, visit www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/podcast. The podcast is also available on [Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), and [Amazon Music](#). With a new episode released each month, Maria’s interview is the eighth episode in the second season. The podcast was designed to share real-time farmer insight, tricks of the trade, and inspiring stories from dairies across Pennsylvania.

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The Center for Dairy Excellence is a non-profit organization initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in 2004. Bringing together people from more than 40 different dairy organizations in Pennsylvania, the Center’s mission is to enhance the profitability of the dairy industry by empowering people, creating partnerships, and increasing the availability and use of resources. Learn more at centerfordairyexcellence.org.

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