

Opinion page Editorial
Community Level Impact of Idaho's Changing Dairy Industry

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During 2008, the Idaho dairy industry generated an estimated \$2.15 billion in milk sales. That amounts to 34 percent of Idaho's farm cash receipts; which places dairy ahead of all other agricultural commodities produced in Idaho. .

Obviously life down on the farm is changing.

In turn, entire communities are changing.

Dairies have brought prosperity and growth to struggling rural communities. That unprecedented growth in the dairy industry has created numerous jobs that have drawn foreign-born dairy workers to our rural communities. The current perception is that the influx of those new employees has brought additional burdens to schools, jails and health care services.

In an effort to understand and quantify those concerns in January of 2008 the Idaho Dairymen's Association commissioned a study with the University of Idaho to determine what impacts foreign-born workers are having on southern Idaho communities. That study is now completed and it should ease most of those concerns

The study involved surveys through phone calls to over 1,300 southern Idaho residents and also in-depth interviews with 63 key community members such as teachers, judges, church leaders, etc. Thorough scientific analysis of the information revealed many important conclusions, some surprising others anticipated, including the following:

- On average these workers are making about \$2,000 per month after paying taxes, a worker with questionable documentation will limit their community involvement.
- Education is extremely important to the Hispanic families and recognized it as the vehicle to raise the standard of living for future generations but the lack of mastering the English language is holding their children back in our rural schools.
- Some rural communities feel the social impacts of this Hispanic influx more than neighboring communities. The cities of Twin Falls and Jerome capture more of these workers' incomes, but the workers may actually live in neighboring counties.
- Private businesses have been able to "turn on a dime" and profit from this Latino influx, but public schools and the justice system by their very nature can't adapt quickly.

- Foreign-born workers do not get more free health care services or commit more crime than other community members.
- A majority of long-time residents do not perceive these workers or dairies as having negative impacted southern Idaho.

This study demonstrated that changes in certain policies and practices are in order, a few of those are:

- A stable and predictable immigration policy needs to be adopted at the national level.
- There is a need for programs that promote the economic prosperity of this workforce.
- The dairy industry along with the University of Idaho Extension should consider developing a community outreach liaison, who is a native Spanish speaker who would be responsible to present opportunities for building bridges between the industry, Latino workers, schools, the health care industry and law enforcement.

The Idaho dairy industry is committed to following the guidelines established in the study and will continue to work with the University of Idaho, state agencies and local communities to accomplish that goal.

To read the study, go to (link). www.idahodairymen.org