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REPORT



## Stakeholders Team up for Action in New York Dairy (STAND): A Collaborative Action-Planning Workshop to Combat Toxic Stress among New York Dairy Farmers

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Mental health challenges on farms, especially dairies, are increasing. A Future Search workshop was held in December 2018 to develop collaborative strategies for addressing this issue. This brief report outlines the methods used at this workshop and its outcomes.

**Methods:** Participants from eight sectors related to producer wellbeing were invited to participate in the 3-day workshop. This included: male and female farmers, health, mental health, government, agricultural, and dairy-specific organizations, and processors. Together, the group worked through activities dealing with the past, present, and future. These activities led to the development of common ground missions and action steps to achieve these goals.

**Results:** The workshop participants developed goals and action steps to create change in nine areas: peer support and social networks; environment; healthcare; business planning; regulations; milk pricing; marketing and consumer education; education, research and technology; and workforce.

**Conclusions:** Much was achieved during the 3-day workshop. Additional follow-up with participants will ensure that momentum toward shared goals continues.

### KEYWORDS

Future search; stress; mental health; behavioral health; whole system in the room

### Introduction

Though not a new issue, mental health issues among farmers have been on the rise recently.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true on small, family-run dairy operations with sole owner-operators.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the roots of this issue run deep, with references to myriad causes such as economics, regulations, and labor shortages noted in the media and literature,<sup>3</sup> as well as anecdotally in conversations with farmers.

With the myriad factors that contribute to farmers' stress levels, it can be difficult for one organization to make broad, structural changes that will significantly reduce stress and improve farmers' wellbeing. This reality is captured in the Social Determinants of Health Model,<sup>4</sup> which acknowledges the impact of an individual's social and physical environment on health. As stated in the Healthy People 2020 goals, stakeholders must work together to understand how programs and policies work together to impact health and to work collaboratively to develop collective goals that address the social

determinants of health.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the authors, along with partners at New York FarmNet, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Sowing the Seeds of Hope, and Community Memorial Hospital in Madison County, NY joined together to host a collaborative action-planning workshop that brought together a host of diverse stakeholders. The workshop was facilitated using Future Search methodologies<sup>5</sup> and aimed to develop a joint strategy for moving toward improved wellbeing for the farm community.

Future Search, which is also referred to as "Whole System in the Room" in some circles,<sup>5–8</sup> was developed as a method for "transforming a system's capability for action" quickly.<sup>5</sup> The meeting focuses on engaging the "whole system" and working based on shared visions rather than the differences between stakeholders. As these workshops progress, results from earlier workshop activities are built upon in order to move individuals through the process and into action. Thus, the workshop methodology and results will be presented simultaneously here.

## Stakeholders team up for action in New York dairy (STAND) workshop methods and results

### Participants

A key component of Future Search meetings is the presence of a variety of stakeholders.<sup>5</sup> In this case, stakeholders representing 1) female farmers and farm wives, 2) male farmers and farm husbands, 3) agricultural organizations, 4) dairy organizations, 5) dairy processors, 6) government organizations, 7) health organizations, and 8) mental health organizations were invited to participate. These groupings and the participants within each were established based on recommendations by the partners listed above, their colleagues, and recommendations by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and were intended to broadly cover the diverse stakeholders within the state that could advise on the issue and dedicate resources for resolving the issue. For example, “government organizations” included both elected officials and employees of various government offices.

The Future Search methodology employs a specific strategy that involves stakeholders working either in mixed groups (i.e., one participant from each stakeholder group participates in each small group) or like groups (e.g., all of the health organizations working together).<sup>5</sup> Mixed groups are intended to build shared knowledge, while like-groups (stakeholder groups, as they are officially termed) work together to use their common knowledge to identify current events.<sup>5</sup> In both settings, participants were asked to self-manage their own groups, though one primary and two co-facilitators were present to describe the meeting process, facilitate large-group discussions, and answer participant questions.

Though aiming for an ideal meeting with eight participants in each stakeholder group (and thus, eight participants in each mixed group), there were some challenges to this. As such, between

three and nine participants within each group attended the STAND workshop. This; however, excludes dairy processors, who declined the invitation to attend.

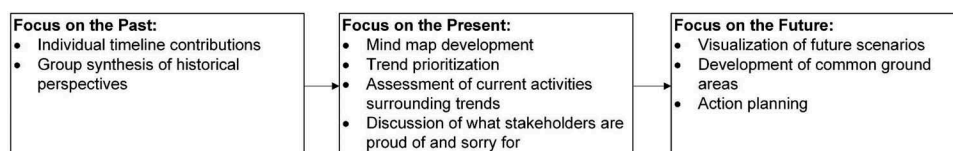
### Focus on the past

An overview of the Future Search process used during the STAND workshop is shown in [Figure 1](#). The first portion of the STAND meeting was dedicated to ensuring that all participants were aware of the historical perspectives that may have contributed to the issue at hand, as well as the diverse backgrounds in the room. In this activity, individuals were asked to populate three distinct timelines (personal, global, and local events) based on their own views of and experiences in the past. In this case, the “local” timeline referred to those events that impacted NY dairy, specifically. Once these timelines were developed, mixed groups worked to summarize and present the information for the larger group. In addition, the full group then discussed implications that the information had on subsequent STAND topics covered in the remainder of the meeting.

### Focus on the present

Once participants summarized and discussed the diverse historical perspectives, the full group assembled for a brainstorming session focused on current trends related to the meeting topic (i.e., the wellbeing of NY dairy farmers). During this activity, participants were asked to assign directional trends as they saw fit, so long as they were able to provide examples. These trends were then added to a display called a “mind map”. Once all trends were added to the mind map, participants voted to identify those that are of greatest concern. During the STAND meeting, these top trends included, listed in no particular order:

- Declining milk prices



**Figure 1.** Overview of the future search process.<sup>4</sup>

- Increasing pressure from external forces
- Decreasing marketing and effectiveness of check-off (a program created to help increase sales and demand for dairy products)
- Declining overall health of farmers and farm workers
- Increasing pressures of land use
- Increasing cost of production
- Decreasing provider availability (specifically those with knowledge of agriculture)
- Decreasing skilled labor

Using these trends as a starting point, stakeholder groups (n = 3–9 participants, depending on the particular group) then assembled to rank and discuss their priority trends. In addition, these small groups discussed what they are currently doing about those trends and what they would like to do in the future. After short presentations to the full group and a discussion of what was heard, stakeholder groups reconvened to discuss the things that they are proud of and sorry for (meaning actions they have not taken to resolve the issue or mistakes they have made in attempting to resolve the issue). For example, in this part of the workshop, the following comments were shared:

“We are proud to produce high quality milk for NYS and the local community.” (Male farmers and farm husbands)

“We are proud of our organizations’ passions to serve farm families and employees.” (Agricultural organizations)

“We are sorry that we are reactive and not proactive – we wait until people are dying.” (Mental health organizations)

“We are sorry we allow activists to dictate agendas.” (Dairy organizations)

These discussions provided participants with a better understanding of the positions of the various groups in the room. They also allow the opportunity for each group to have frank and open discussions about their own contributions to the current situation.

### ***Focus on the future and common ground***

Building on what had already been discussed in the workshop, participants reorganized into mixed

groups (n = 5–7 per group) and then prepared creative visualizations of their ideal futures. At STAND, participants portrayed these futures through skits, storytelling, and song. Using these visualizations, the full group worked together to identify the common themes presented and narrowed these ideas into common ground areas developed based on group consensus. Common ground areas resulting from STAND included:

- Peer support and social networks
- Environment
- Healthcare
- Business planning
- Regulations
- Milk pricing
- Marketing and consumer education
- Education, research, and technology
- Workforce

Breaking into mixed interest groups surrounding each of these topics, workshop participants then spent time developing mission statements and action items for each common ground area. This process allowed participants to tackle large sticking points, such as “milk pricing,” with feasible, stakeholder-supported steps. For example, those working on milk pricing identified action steps that included 1) continuing and expanding discussions between farmers, co-ops, and processors to get consensus on how to reform milk pricing, and 2) encouraging new product development, expanded markets, and diversification on farms. Appendix I provides a brief summary of the workshop process and outlines common ground areas and the action steps that various partners committed to within each area. These action items, as well as timely updates can also be found online at (<https://www.nycamh.org/programs-and-services/stand.php>).

### **Discussion**

Future Search methods have been used successfully in several occupational safety and health settings. This includes a 2014 Future Search focused on reducing tractor overturn fatalities,<sup>7,9</sup> as well as a 2015 Future Search focused on improving the overall wellbeing of commercial fishermen on the northeastern US coast. Given these successful

events, the methods seemed to be a good fit for addressing mental health issues in the NY dairy industry. The positive outputs from the workshop have set the stage for future action and collaboration among partners.

Though STAND was successful in providing an outlet to develop feasible action steps for improving the lives of NY dairy farmers, there were some challenges. First, no dairy processors were at the table, despite being invited. While no direct feedback was given as to why these organizations chose not to attend, workshop attendees suggested that this may have been due to a history of difficult relationships between the farm community and dairy processors.

Similarly, due to the nature of farming, few farmers were able to attend the meeting: only seven women and three men represented the two groups, though some participants representing other organizations also consider themselves farmers.

## Conclusions and next steps

Overall, the STAND workshop led to greater collaboration between stakeholders and specific action items to help improve the wellbeing of dairy farmers. Although the event brought many organizations together, it is possible that important viewpoints were missed due to low attendance by certain stakeholder groups. To address this, workshop results will be presented to relevant stakeholders who were not able to attend. This will provide an opportunity for these individuals to provide feedback on the action plans and encourage greater involvement by all stakeholders. In addition to reaching these stakeholders, an AgriSafe webinar was held on the STAND meeting in order to share results and methodologies with a wider audience.

In addition to collecting feedback from such stakeholders, the group will reconvene for a follow-up meeting and check-in six-months after the STAND meeting took place. This follow-up will allow for troubleshooting related to the commitments and serve as a way to further encourage networking among the stakeholders.

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## Disclosure statement

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