

Final Report on Pasture-Grazed Dairy Products

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In 2008, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) received a USDA North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to explore pasture-based systems as a source of “specialty milk” for value-added dairy processing. The final report from the 4-year SARE project exploring the challenges and opportunities of a pasture-based dairy market is now available (links below).

Preliminary research in 2005 by Dr. Scott Rankin at UW-Madison showed that pasture milk produces cheddar cheese that has a creamier texture and a natural golden color that was preferred over cheese from confinement-fed cows in consumer taste testing. The SARE project used a value chain approach, bringing together pasture-based dairy farmers, processors, chefs, and researchers as a team to guide a more comprehensive investigation of the chemical and physical properties of this unique milk when made into cheese, butter, or other products. The overall goals of the project were to develop a definitive understanding of: 1) the unique physical, chemical, and flavor qualities of grass-fed milk, and 2) an ability to manage seasonal changes in pasture milk flavor and physical properties to improve processing quality. Long term goals included creating: 1) an increased awareness among dairy processors of the opportunities and appropriate uses for pasture milk, and 2) a strategy for establishment of a premium market for pasture milk products.

The project included a research component which compared the chemical, culinary, and flavor qualities of conventionally-produced milk to pasture-grazed milk sourced from a local cooperative consisting of five Wisconsin grazing farms. Additional insight into attitudes toward pasture-based dairy products and to clarify marketing terminology that would resonate with consumers as well as distributors and retail interests such as restaurants, were developed through the use of consumer taste panels and an “opinion leader” professional focus group. The final report, a short project video summary, and related market development reports can be accessed on-line at two websites: http://datcp.wi.gov/Farms/Grazing/Grass_Fed_Market_Development/ or www.foodsci.wisc.edu/pasture_grazed_dairy.