

## Impressions from the EDF Congress 2015

by **Katrine Lecornu, Judit Kühn and Ulrike Bayer**

Between June 24th and June 26th, 2015 about 400 dairy farmers and professionals from 25 European and overseas countries got together in Rostock's city hall for the congress of the European Dairy Farmers Association (EDF). This year the European Dairy Farmers celebrated their 25th anniversary under the motto "**25 years entrepreneurship - always looking into the future**" and discussed business concepts for dairy farms after the end of milk quota. 25 years after the German reunification modern dairy farms have emerged in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the host province of the anniversary EDF congress. How did they tackle the economic upheaval and how are they positioned for the future?

### **Farm management makes the difference**

When visiting the German EDF farms in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania it became clear once more that the farm size isn't related to the level of animal welfare or the general appearance of a dairy farm. Many of the congress participants were impressed with the cleanliness and the atmosphere on these farms, where up to 1800 dairy cows were kept. Characterising for the success of the visited EDF farms were a steady and deliberate growth, thoughtful planning and foresight, the achievement of good technical results and manageable risks and investments.

### **It is difficult to be efficient on small scale farms**

A part of the European Dairy Farmers have a lot smaller farms where it often is a lot more difficult to operate efficiently. It was especially for farm managers of smaller farms impressive and important to see how organized and rationalised the farms in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania are. On small scale farms, you often discover the heavy workload when too many things become an immediate emergency.

"**The world is hungry for dairy products**", stated Dr. Jeremy Hill, IDF President, and it is not about which production system is the best and which country performs the best. *We need it all!* But getting there is going to be a volatile process and it will be the same for each and every country whether you are in Europe, in the United States or in New Zealand. Every production system needs to be more resilient and more efficient.

On the other hand "**a trend is a trend is a trend that may bend**" in the long run", stated Dr. Folkhard Isermeyer from the Thünen Institute, Germany. Dr. Isermeyer is referring to the current trend of an increase in global milk production by having bigger herd sizes, increased milk yield per cow as well as a decrease in total numbers of farms, concentration of milk production in certain regions, and increased milk prices. *But what if this trend changes?* Milk prices may decrease, EU may become a net milk importer and a new paradigm regarding social acceptance for animal husbandry and intensive farming could change the outlook for dairy farmers. Could this be a comeback for small scale family farms? How will the long-term development for dairy farming look like? And which opportunities will arise from this?

Steffi Wille-Sonk, EDF scientist, confirmed a trend from earlier years when milk prices went up, cost of production increased in the same proportion. Is this because we invest in future growth? Labour input still remains a crucial issue. There are differences in the economic performance amongst dairy farmers in Europe and realizing the potential for improvement is crucial for every farmer. **When will your performance be profitable?** asked Steffi Wille-Sonk this year again the audience. Determining the risk a farmer is willing to take is especially fundamental for young farmers which plan to invest heavily. *Do we set too much "hope" on the accounting balance, and don't focus enough on entrepreneurial skills,* asked a farmer.

### **We're market actors and global forces will change trends and perspectives**

Marco Freiherr von Münchhausen, author and coach, warned us about our "inner Schweinehund" - our inner saboteur- who prevents us from finding interesting ideas outside of traditional schemes. In general, farmers (as most entrepreneurs) are looking for transparency, clear trends, secure markets, stability and are trying to limit the risks.

We need to separate ourselves from this, have to realign ourselves and give up old thinking patterns in order to find solutions that are outside the box. Adjusting to a new way of thinking in order to be able to adapt easier and to be proactive instead of struggling against constraints, rules and challenges.

We have to **think differently, think diverse** but always look into the future.



European Dairy Farmers in an association of future-oriented dairy farmers from all over Europe. We meet up regularly to share experiences and knowledge on all aspects of milk production. There both, economic performance and future assessments are compared. Katrine Lecornu, dairy farmer from France, is the President of EDF.

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