



STEWARDSHIP IN DAIRY FARMING & THE VITAL CAPITAL INDEX

Dairy farmers become dairy farmers for many reasons, including family tradition, the joy of working outdoors, a passion for animals, and commitment to a working landscape. For centuries, dairy farm families have built a livelihood from the land and passed their farms from one generation to the next. Farmers have long been dedicated to their profession and to the land they work, but they have lacked critical tools to measure their success and their impact on the economic, social, and physical environments around them. That is in the process of changing with the **Vital Capital Index for Dairy Agriculture (VCI)**.

DAIRY FARMERS TREASURE THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND THEIR LAND, AND THEY WORK TO ENRICH BOTH THROUGH PRACTICES SUCH AS:

- Crop rotation, integrated pest management, and advanced animal husbandry
- Water stewardship, by reusing water and preventing run-off
- Land planning for conservation, biodiversity, and recreation
- Creative reuse of materials, like recycling manure as fertilizer or to produce electricity
- Community service through local, regional, and even national participation

These measures make business and environmental sense, and dairy farmers know they must first succeed as businesses if they are to succeed at all. Activities like conservation and recycling can enhance a farm's reputation as a good neighbor while helping a farm prosper.

IN A NUTSHELL, FARMERS NEED THREE THINGS TO SUCCEED IN THE LONG TERM, NAMELY:

- Financial Prosperity
- Measurable Progress on Agricultural Stewardship
- Community Support and Good Neighborliness

SO, WHAT IS THE VCI, AND WHAT DOES IT REALLY DO?

The VCI is a tool kit for dairy farmers. It is a broad mix of scientific indicators that farmers review periodically to help them measure their impacts on key resources – or vital capital – in the world around them. It includes big picture items such as their contributions to the local economy, their quality of life as dairy farmers, and their relationship with the community. It also includes far more technical matters such as crop management, water usage, waste recycling, energy use, pest management, and more. In effect, the VCI encourages dairy farmers to take a step back and review their work from a broad, top line perspective as well as from a narrower, grounded perspective.

The VCI evolved as a partnership between dairy farmers and scientists. Without extensive input and enthusiastic buy-in from dairy farmers, the VCI would amount to nothing more than an academic exercise. Local communities as well as regional and national stakeholders weighed in to ensure the VCI addressed their concerns, but the key players were the farmers. Their participation set the stage for the VCI to become a critical resource for the dairy industry. And that's exactly what's happening.

Dairy farmers review the dozens of indicators annually and see how they measure up. Are they getting full value for their energy use? Are they good neighbors who earn the trust and support of their community? Are they maintaining good soil health? Can they use their cow manure as fertilizer or treat and sell it as compost? Are they providing proper nutrition and comfortable living conditions for their herd and getting maximum production as a result? The farmers are asked to consider these questions and many, many more. And they are asked to come up with answers that can be measured in specific terms, not just with vague notions like "I think so." The categories provide tools to measure performance, and they suggest ways to improve it. At its core, the VCI is a way for farmers to review the broad range of their impacts on the world around them at a given point in time, measure how they are performing, and then identify adjustments they can make from year to year that provide for continuous improvement.

The point of the VCI is to give dairy farmers a reliable and usable way of measuring their operations to better understand their successes and identify areas for potential improvement.

The VCI was initially a collaborative effort between the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences and the Agri-Mark dairy cooperative, known best for their flagship Cabot cheese brand. The concept was introduced to the leading national dairy industry trade group, Dairy Management, Inc. (DMI), who took over sponsorship of the effort through the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy. It took four years of study, testing, and input from dairy farmers to develop. The single driving question throughout the process was: **"Does this help dairy farmers run their businesses more sustainably?"** and that inquiry is at the heart of every category in the index. The ultimate goal is for the VCI to be the gold standard for the dairy industry and implement it broadly on a voluntary basis over the next five years. Based on its early success, the VCI looks to have a very bright future.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Review the current version of the VCI:

<http://www.justmeans.com/reports/Vital-Capital-Index-for-Dairy-Ag/732.html>

Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences

<http://www.manomet.org>

Cabot Creamery Cooperative

<http://www.cabotcheese.coop/sustain>

Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy

<http://www.usdairy.com/sustainability>

