



Idaho's Hispanic milkers get training in their own language

From the first “Hola, bienvenido” to the certificate the Hispanic milkers receive at the end of the day, the University of Idaho’s Spanish-language milking schools are conducted in the students’ first language and the teachers’ second.

With most Idaho dairies—whether they milk 100 cows or 5,000—employing at least some Hispanic milkers, offering dairy training in Spanish is now essential, says Extension dairy specialist Joe Dalton.

Dalton—Hispanic on his mother’s side—describes himself as the “prototypical person who took Spanish in high school and college.” While he can read and understand Spanish, building his own sentences is another matter entirely. But Dalton diligently translates his slides and carefully maps out his lessons because educating today’s farm workers is so important to him and to Idaho’s agricultural industries

“If we want Hispanic employees to do a good job of milking our cattle, then we’ve got to be able to train them in the proper procedures in the language they understand best,” says Scott Jensen, UI Extension educator in Canyon County and a co-teacher of the milking schools.

“This is also a good way to reach out to them, and our experience so far has been that they’re very hungry and eager to learn,” Jensen says. He and Dalton have offered the milking classes in Caldwell, Twin Falls, Preston and Blackfoot since 2001 and plan to expand the topics to calf-raising.

Jensen, who speaks Spanish fluently and admits he even thinks in the language, first learned Spanish in preparation for an



Photos by Brad Beckman

Participants in the UI milking school receive assistance from Extension’s Joe Dalton, bottom photo, center.

LDS mission in Colombia in 1983-84. Since then, he’s had plenty of opportunities “to brush the rust off” his language skills, selling bulls to Mexican buyers while he worked for a Texas ranch, hauling liquid sugar for The Amalgamated Sugar Co. in Nampa, and teaching physical science, botany and zoology in Nampa High School’s bilingual program.

The milkers’ schools are steeped in animal and dairy science. Students, mostly Hispanic men between 18 and 55, vary widely in education—anywhere from

grade school to college. Topics include food safety, anatomy, physiology, sanitation, milking equipment systems and mastitis prevention, and the depth of the students’ questions let Dalton and Jensen know they are learning.

Meridian dairyman Gary Johnson, who speaks Spanish himself, says updated practices and explanations for the reasons underlying dairy procedures are what made last year’s school in Caldwell so valuable. In American Falls, dairyman John Andersen agrees. “What the school did is illustrated and explained very specifically why we do what we do, and that’s why I thought it was beneficial,” Andersen says. For example, Andersen’s employees had never really understood what somatic cells are and why the dairy uses precise procedures for maximal milk let-down.

For the past decade, all of the milkers on the Andersens’ 22-year-old dairy have been Hispanic. Dalton expects that trend to continue. “In Idaho, if they make an average \$8 an hour milking cows, that’s \$80-plus a day on a 10- or 12-hour day. In Mexico, if you’re doing similar agricultural labor, you would not make \$8 a day.”

Many Hispanic workers are also eager for overtime—a good match for those dairy producers who prefer milkers to work 12-hour rather than 8-hour shifts. And, realistically, with the migration of Anglo youth out of rural communities, “who is going to do the work?” Dalton asks.

