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NATIONAL DAIRY SHRINE NAMES GUEST OF HONOR RECIPIENT

Maribel, WI. – Calvin Covington of King, North Carolina, who spent more than two decades barnstorming the U.S. to educate cheese makers about the yield and profitability advantages of using milk with high butterfat and protein content, has been named 2010 National Dairy Shrine Guest of Honor. The prestigious award is given each year to salute a contemporary leader for his or her outstanding achievements and contributions that benefit the dairy industry.

Freshly graduated from North Carolina State University and newly hired by the American Jersey Cattle Association and National All-Jersey Inc. (AJCA-NAJ), his job was to spread the word about high solids milk. It was a colossal undertaking that was often done alone and never with a script; Covington learned and improvised as he went. It was a marathon of small individual steps that took him from coast to coast and from north to south... over and over again. It was also a crucial task that laid a cornerstone for the multiple component pricing (MCP) structure that is now used in all Federal Milk Marketing Orders. Without it, the equity idea that has brought perhaps billions of dollars of additional income to the entire dairy industry might have never blossomed.

Spreading the word was a daunting process borne out of desperate financial times faced by dairies that made high-solids milk. During a gypsy-like period from the late 1970s through most of the '80s, Covington wore many hats: Educator, counselor, public relations advisor, author, speaker, lobbyist, salesman, and even tutor. But perhaps his most important role was that of showman, giving hands-on demonstrations to illustrate the yield power of high-solids milk. He did hundreds upon hundreds of them. Arranging for necessary milk supplies at his stops, he would make batches of cheese for plant managers using their own equipment, vividly illustrating the point that high-solids milk produced more finished product. Sometimes it was a LOT more.

“I remember one plant where we increased the yield so much that the agitator paddles would not turn,” he recalled in a magazine article years later. “At another plant the yield increased so much that they closed down an extra day per week.” And yet, even with those kind of eye-popping results staring them in the face, Covington’s presentations were often met with some version of, “Yes, I see, but...”

Keep in mind that these were the days when the producer milk price incentive structure had fallen far out of touch with market demand. American consumers’ enthusiasm for Class 1 fluid milk was already in a long decline spiral, but total demand was more than being made up for by a voracious appetite for cheese in the form of pizza. Even so, producer milk pricing remained a dinosaur system that focused on volume, not solids. In fact, in many areas it was even still legal to add a small amount of water to farm bulk tanks. Mozzarella and cheddar were fast becoming kings of the dairy product world, but the milk supply fell miles short of serving their needs.

Covington's determined message was that with the right milk, many more pounds of cheese could be made using the same amount of time, labor, and equipment. That not only meant gigantic leaps in efficiency and profitability for cheese makers, but it also meant the right kind of milk was worth paying more for. Gradually, it was a message that began to sink in. It happened slowly at first as individual cheese plants adopted voluntary multiple component pricing programs for their shippers. Then it burst out in April 1988 when MCP was adopted in the Great Basin Federal Order. A checkerboard of other orders across the country followed suit throughout the 1990s, and MCP was finally adopted in all Federal Orders beginning January 1, 2000.

Covington, of course, did not carry the MCP torch alone, nor did he start the process. But his was the anchor leg of a race in which both dairy producers and cheese makers have clearly been big winners, measured by the millions of dollars of extra income and profit that MCP generates for producers each year, regardless of the kind of cows they milk. He was, as the saying goes, the right person for the right job at the right time.

Covington is currently a Director of the Holstein Foundation, a former Vice President of the National Pedigree Livestock Council, and former Chairman of the Council on Dairy Cattle Breeding. He has been married to his wife Lorraine for 30 years. He earned a bachelor's degree in Animal Science from North Carolina State University and a masters in Rural Sociology from The Ohio State University. Starting as an AJCA-NAJ Area Representative in 1977, he later became a Milk Marketing Specialist, then Assistant Secretary and General Manager, then Treasurer, and finally Executive Secretary and Chief Executive Officer.

In 2000 he became CEO of Southeast Milk, Inc., serving 300 producer members in Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. He retired from that position in May 2010, to return to his family's fourth generation farm in North Carolina. Hay, corn, and a variety of consulting jobs occupy his time today; beef cows, produce crops, and preaching are on the horizon.

Previously honored as World Dairy Expo "Industry Person of the Year" in 2003, Covington's dynamic impact at the Jersey organizations continues to resonate with their members. Iowa dairy producer G. Joe Lyon, former AJCA President and 1991 Expo Guest of Honor winner, says his integrity, intelligence, kindness, determination, and remarkable ability to get things done are qualities that even the biggest global corporations are lucky to have just once in a leader. "But the Jersey industry had three of them in a row in the three Cs: Jim Cavanaugh, Maurice Core, and Calvin Covington. Calvin is the kind of person the world needs more of."