



PRESS RELEASE
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Claire Mikolayunas Joins Dairy Business Innovation Center as Dairy Sheep Specialist

MADISON, Wis. – With Wisconsin positioned as the national leader in the number of dairy sheep farms and research stations, the Dairy Business Innovation Center has added a new Dairy Sheep Specialist to its team to further grow sheep milk production and meet consumer demand for specialty milk cheeses.

Claire Mikolayunas, a Ph.D student at the University of Wisconsin, joins the DBIC team to lead the new Wisconsin Dairy Sheep Initiative, providing support for emerging dairy sheep producers and processors. The initiative is a partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and will help provide technical and business planning support to new producers and connect producers with viable markets. Regional educational meetings, seminars and producer resources are also being planned.

“Wisconsin leads the nation in the number of dairy sheep farms and the production of sheep milk products, but demand still exceeds supply,” Mikolayunas said. “More Wisconsin cheesemakers are producing artisan sheep milk and blended milk cheeses, and gaining national recognition for their quality. We want to keep this industry growing, and growing in a way that is profitable for both producer and processor.”

With an undergraduate degree from Cornell, a master's in animal science, and an expected spring 2010 doctorate degree in animal sciences, both from the University of Wisconsin, Mikolayunas also serves as President of the Dairy Sheep Association of North America. Last week, she was selected as an American Dairy Science Association Midwestern Branch Young Scholar for 2010 based on her research accomplishments on the nutrition of dairy ewes with emphasis on protein utilization.

The dairy sheep industry is fairly new to Wisconsin, and newer yet to the United States. Prior to the early 1980s, there were no commercial sheep dairies in the country, but increasing demand by U.S. consumers for imported sheep milk cheeses led a few entrepreneurial producers to begin operations. Today, 13 licensed dairy sheep herds in Wisconsin produce nearly 1 million pounds of sheep milk annually, while seven licensed cheese plants craft specialty sheep milk cheeses. At the 2009 American Cheese Society Annual Competition, Wisconsin cheesemakers earned nearly half of all awards given to cheeses made with sheep milk.

“Wisconsin has the opportunity to become not only a national leader in sheep milk and sheep cheese production, but to set a national standard for the quality of these products,” said Jeanne Carpenter, DBIC Communications Director. “The DBIC is honored to have Claire Mikolayunas join our team. The depth and breadth of her knowledge will lead Wisconsin producers to a new level.”

Future components of the Wisconsin Dairy Sheep Initiative may include:

- **Sheep Milk Discovery session** – The DBIC plans to bring together industry leaders, importers, marketers and producers to determine next steps needed in growing sheep milk production.
- **Sheep Milking School** – A five-day hands-on program for beginning dairy sheep farmers is in the planning stages.
- **Producer Manual & Fact Sheets** – The initiative will develop technical resources for sheep producers and processors.

For more information about the Wisconsin Dairy Sheep Initiative, contact Claire Mikolayunas at 608-332-2889 or email clairemikolay@gmail.com.

The Dairy Business Innovation Center offers technical assistance to dairy producers and processors in developing value-added dairy products, business planning and market development. For more information, visit www.dbicusa.org or contact Jeanne Carpenter, 608-358-7837.