

# Sustainability and Environmental Impact Important to Consumers

By Donna M. Amaral-Phillips



College of Agriculture,  
Food and Environment  
Cooperative Extension Service

Understanding the preferences and priorities of consumers is important as it directly impacts purchases and thus milk price at the farm level. Sometimes our perceptions of consumers' needs and preferences are clouded and reflect our biases. Thus, surveying the opinions of consumers by an unbiased group is important to keep marketing, packaging, and production of specific dairy products relative to consumers' opinions and desires.

A survey, as such, was published recently in the scientific [\*Journal of Dairy Science\*](#). The authors randomly selected a group of consumers and asked them to rate the importance of food sustainability as well as the terms they associated with sustainability of dairy products. Respondents were those who not only purchased dairy products, but also those that purchased both dairy and plant-based products.

Of the respondents, 77% believed sustainability should be promoted for the greater good versus their personal benefit. This trend was seen with consumers of dairy-only or dairy plus plant-based products. The respondents were asked to rate a list of terms they associated with sustainability. Healthiness was the most important attribute selected related to sustainability. Yogurt (84%), cottage cheese (75%), and milk (72%) ranked the highest for dairy products selected as healthy. Whipping cream, coffee creamer, and ice cream (not one I expected) were ranked the least healthy. Butter was in the middle of the pack of dairy products.

Five additional sustainability attributes selected included a minimal carbon footprint or greenhouse gas emissions, animal "happiness" or welfare, few or no preservatives, and the use of simple or minimal ingredients. Over half of responding customers noted they assessed the sustainability of a food product with the product's label being an important source of this information at the time of purchase. Packaging type also impacted their assessment of a product's sustainability. The respondents considered glass packaging the most sustainable, followed by cartons. Plastic was selected as the least sustainable option. Products packaged with multi-servings were considered more sustainable than single servings.

Consumer perceptions do and will continue to impact dairy processors' marketing campaigns and product packaging. We need to continue to increase our understanding of the perceptions of consumers for dairy products. Our terminology may be slightly different from consumers, but at the end of the day we may have a similar viewpoint, just a little different way of describing the same desire when it comes to sustainability.