Dairy Pipeline

School of Animal Sciences
Volume 47, No. 1 ● January/February 2026

Grant money available through the Southeast Dairy Business Innovation Initiative in 2026

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The Southeast Dairy Business Innovation Initiative (SDBII), based at the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture's Center for Dairy Advancement and Sustainability, supports growth and modernization for dairy producers and processors across the Southeast. SDBII offers free and low-cost resources, including an annual value-added dairy conference, topical workshops, and practical decision-making tools to help dairy businesses plan for sustainable growth.

Funded through the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service under the 2018 Farm Bill, SDBII also directs 50% of its funding toward competitive grants that help dairy businesses invest in new technologies, innovations, and processing improvements. As of the 2025 spring cycle, 206 grants have been awarded. Third to North Carolina (47) and Tennessee (40), 33 of these awards were given to Virginia dairy producers. Funded awards were categorized as Precision Technology & Management (11), Farm Infrastructure Improvement represented (17), Dairy Business Planning represented (3), and Specialty Processing Equipment (2) in Virginia. These funds have been used to purchase equipment to automate bottle labeling, as well as equipment, including fans, a TMR mixer, herd management software, alley scrapers, activity tags, a manure agitator, a precision planting system, as well as develop a succession plan.

The 2026 funding cycle will open for the Farm Infrastructure Improvement and the Precision Technology & Management Grants beginning January 1, 2026 with applications due by March 4, 2026, at 5 p.m. Eligible applicants include licensed dairy producers or processors in AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV, and Puerto Rico. Businesses must be legally permitted to produce or process milk from cattle, goats, sheep, water buffalo, camels, or other dairy species. Projects involving raw milk sales for human or pet consumption are not eligible.

SDBII grants are offered annually, and applicants may apply for **one grant category per cycle**. They may receive multiple awards over time, but no more than **two active awards** at once. Prior awards in the same category must be completed before reapplying. Total funding across all grants may not exceed **$700,000 within a three-year period**, including the current request.

Farm Infrastructure Improvement Grant Details:

- Maximum award: **$100,000**

- Required match: **25% of requested funds** (equivalent to 20% of total project cost)
- Match must be cash from allowable expenses; it cannot include construction costs or labor from the applicant's own employees.

Funding Priorities:
This grant supports improvements that increase labor, production, or marketing efficiencies to strengthen the sustainability and competitiveness of Southeast dairy farms. Projects should clearly demonstrate how the proposed investment will deliver measurable operational improvements. Topic areas could include:

1. Improvements to existing facilities to reduce the impact of heat stress and seasonal milk production swings
2. Investments in raw milk storage, cooling capacity, and/or transportation efficiency
3. Modernization and improvements to milk harvest
4. Improvements to feed and forage management and storage opportunities
5. Improvements to animal housing and environments
6. Water, waste, and manure management improvements

Precision Technology & Management Grant Details:

- Maximum award: **$150,000**
- Required match: **25% of requested funds** (equivalent to 20% of total project cost)
- Match must be cash from allowable expenses and cannot include construction costs or labor from the applicant's own employees.

Funding Priorities:
This grant supports the adoption of precision technologies and management strategies that improve the sustainability and competitiveness of Southeast dairy operations. All proposals must include justification for why the specific technology is needed. Projects should clearly demonstrate how the technology will:

1. Improve animal health or performance
2. Enhance labor efficiency
3. Reduce energy use or environmental impact
4. Increase the productive use of the farm's land base

Now is an excellent time for dairy producers to take advantage of the SDBII grant opportunities designed to strengthen and modernize Southeastern dairy operations. Whether you're looking to upgrade on-farm infrastructure or integrate new precision technologies, these grants can significantly offset costs and help you improve efficiency, animal care, and long-term sustainability. With generous reimbursement levels and clear pathways for innovation, these programs offer valuable support to producers ready to invest in the future of their farms. We encourage all eligible dairy businesses to consider applying and take this important step toward growth and competitiveness. For more specific details and tips on completing the application, visit https://sdbii.tennessee.edu/ or email Christina Petersson-Wolfe at milk@vt.edu.

Dairy Farm Lameness and Hoof Health Care

Authored by Jeremy Daubert, ANR Extension Agent, Dairy—Rockingham County, Virginia Cooperative Extension; jdaubert@vt.edu

Lameness on dairy farms remains a concern for animal welfare. While FARM goals suggest lameness needs to be below 5%; research still shows many farms above that level, with some farms over 20%. Lameness doesn't just "look" bad for a farm — it can be costly.

It is important to understand how to identify lameness on your farm. While spotting severely lame cows is obvious, being able to effectively identify mild and moderately lame cows is equally important. All current locomotion scoring systems are based on the following chart. It is a 5-point scoring system, with 'one' as normal and 'five' being severely lame.

Locomotion Scoring System

(Sprecher, et.al., Theriogenology 47:1179, 1997)

Lameness Score	Clinical Description	Assessment
1	Normal	The cow stands and walks with a level-back posture. Her gait is normal.
2	Mildly lame	The cow stands with a level-back posture but develops an arched-back posture when walking. Her gait remains normal.
3	Moderately lame	An arched-back posture is evident both while standing and walking. Her gait is affected and is best described as short-striding with one or more limbs.
4	Lame	An arched-back posture is always evident, and gait is best described as one deliberate step at a time. The cow favors one or more limbs/feet.
5	Severely lame	The cow additionally demonstrates an inability or extreme reluctance to bear weight on one or more of her limbs/feet.

Clinical lameness can cause an average loss of production of 5.5 pounds per day (Warnick et al., 2001). Depending on your management system and the travel required for cows to get to feed and milking, this number may be higher. In addition, lame cows have a lower body condition score and take longer to get bred back. Lameness can also contribute to a higher cull rate and less value for those culls. Total costs per case of lameness can vary quite a bit depending on the severity, but average around $336.91 per case (Robscis et al., 2023).

Lameness can be infectious or non-infectious. Infectious cases include foot rot and digital dermatitis, also known as hairy heel warts. Infectious diseases can be controlled by properly running foot baths. They are caused by different bacteria and can also be spread from cow to cow. There are some different options for footbaths, including copper sulfate and formaldehyde. Follow the label instructions for each product and don't forget to wear proper PPE as several of these products have health risks associated with them. Non-infectious hoof issues include abscesses and white line disease. These problems are caused by lapses in management. They could be nutrition, facility-related, or injury-related. If you begin to see lots of these, work with your veterinarian and nutritionist to pinpoint the problem. A high-starch or low-fiber diet could be the culprit. Or potentially a problem with cow comfort and free stall maintenance. Non-infectious diseases are not contagious but can still cause a lot of problems.

Regular maintenance for hoof trimming can prevent many problems and catch diseases sooner. Learning how to address hoof problems on the farm and between regular trimmings is a great strategy to help keep cows healthy. Don't forget to have a way to restrain the cows to trim their feet. This is important for the safety of the cows, as well as the person working on them. There are several "vet" chutes on the market that can be used to trim feet. You will also need adequate supplies and equipment to do the trimming. Keep sharp hoof knives, a grinder trimming wheel, and hoof wrap on hand. In some cases, a block and glue can help the cow to heal sooner.

Figure 1: Workshop Participants practicing on cadaver feet.

Keeping good records is a key to reducing lameness on the farm. If you don't know where you are, you can't know where you are going. Record lameness scores using the above chart for all cows. Take note of the percentage of cows in each category (1-5).

Keep the scoring consistent, have the same person score each time, or have the same person train the scorer. Once you have done this, treat cows that are 3 or above. See what the prevailing problem is on your farm and keep records of all diseases. If there is one problem with several cows, work to identify ways to manage this. Continue to monitor severely lame cows and treat those problems. Once a year, go back and do a whole herd locomotion score and compare from the previous year. Have you made progress? Is it getting worse?

Currently, there are several companies working on the use of cameras and artificial intelligence to identify lame cows. This technology is still being developed, but shows great promise for consistent daily monitoring.

We recently held hands-on workshops to help train producers how to identify and treat lame cows, and hope to provide more of these in the future. If you are interested in this type of workshop, reach out to let us know.

Upcoming Events

January 3, 2025
VA Holstein Annual Meeting

January 13, 2026 (Webinar 2 of the Winter Meeting Series, Presented by Dr. John Currin, DVM, DABVP-Dairy **)**
-Calving Difficulties & Correction Techniques
-Colostrum Management
-Uterine Prolapse Care

In-Person Meetings for the Winter Meeting Series -Hands-on demonstration with calving tools/Live demonstration using a calf model to address calving challenges

Dates and locations:

- Jan 20th - Chatham (lunchtime)
- Jan 20th - Buckingham (night)
- Jan 21st - Chatham (night)
- Jan 22nd - Abingdon (night)
- Jan 26th - Floyd (night)
- Jan 27th - Scott (night)
- Feb 3rd - Paige (night)
- Feb 10th - Middleburg (night)
- Feb 19th - King George (night)
- Feb 24th - Wythe (night)
- Feb 26th - Madison/Greene (night)
- Feb 27th - Rockingham (morning)
- Mar 2nd - Montgomery (night)
- Mar 10th - Tazewell (night)
- Mar 12th - Patrick (night)

February 18, 2025
No-Till Conference, Rockingham Fairgrounds

March 10, 2025
Calf Workshop, Rockingham

If you are a person with a disability and require any auxiliary aids, services, or other accommodations for any Extension event, please discuss your accommodation needs with the Extension staff at your local Extension office at least 1 week prior to the event.

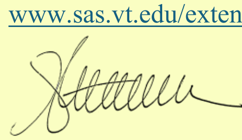
Additional Notes:

▪ The dairy extension group is working with VDH to assist in distributing PPE to dairy farms. Request a kit online at https://shorturl.at/ethov or contact your local extension agent. Requests will be filled as supplies allow.

▪ Your input could guide future programming! Please complete the short survey at https://tinyurl.com/dairy-extension.

▪ Southeast Dairy Business Innovation Initiative
Grants Opening in January 2026:
-Farm Infrastructure Improvement
-Precision Technology and Management

For more information on Dairy Extension or to learn more about our current programs, visit us at VTDairy—Home of the Dairy Extension Program online at www.sas.vt.edu/extension/vtdairy.html



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2026 DASC-185NP