Perry Aasness Named Executive Director
New leader brings farm background and varied industry experience to Minnesota Agri-Growth Council.

By Lucas Sjostrom, contributing editor

As of mid-July, Perry Aasness is your new Minnesota Agri-Growth Council Executive Director. If you recognize the name, it’s because Perry’s involvement in upper Midwest agriculture has been constant over the past two decades through public service, legislative relations, and leadership in farm organizations. Most of that time was spent in Minnesota, and all of it was spent working on issues impacting Minnesota agribusiness.

Aasness grew up on his family’s farm near Fergus Falls, MN, a place very dear to him. Perry and his family currently reside in Woodbury, but he’ll take every chance he can to get up to the farm. He says it’s his family’s version of the Minnesota lake cabin; theirs just doesn’t have a lake.

Leaving the family farm for college, Aasness began his education at North Dakota State University, receiving an associate’s degree in agricultural economics in 1984. He then returned to the farm in partnership with his father. They grew corn, soybeans, and wheat and had some livestock at the time. But after eight years, he got the bug to finish a four-year degree, this time at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul.

“I got to the point in my life where I wanted to finish up my college education,” Aasness said about graduating with a Bachelor’s Degree. His emphasis of focus was agricultural economics and political science, finishing his degree in 1994, a foreshadowing for his new role at the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council.

But college wasn’t the first time Aasness was introduced to governmental issues. “I always had an interest in public policy. My dad was a state legislator from 1979 to 1982, and I probably caught the political bug at that time,” he says. Paul Aasness represented Grant, Otter Tail and Traverse Counties while farming full-time near Wendell, MN.

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Since 1914, Kemps has been delighting families throughout the upper Midwest with wholesome and delicious dairy products. From their beginnings as a small creamery in Southeastern Minnesota, Kemps has extended its roots to include the manufacture and marketing of fresh milk, premium ice cream and frozen yogurt, frozen novelties, sour cream and cottage cheese through retail supermarkets and food service channels.

Headquartered today in St. Paul, Minnesota, they operate five manufacturing facilities in Minnesota and Wisconsin and have over 1,126 employees. Kemps operates seven manufacturing facilities, five milk processing plants, one ice cream and frozen novelty plant, and one cultured products location. Their fresh dairy products are distributed throughout the Midwest, while the frozen desserts are distributed nationally.

Q & A with Rachel Kyllo, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing:

What is new at Kemps?
We completed the acquisition of Cass-Clay Dairy in Fargo, North Dakota in March of 2012. Cass-Clay is a $75 million manufacturer and marketer of dairy products in North Dakota and surrounding areas. The Cass-Clay brand has a long heritage and is the consumer preferred brand of dairy products in North Dakota.

How is Kemps funded?
Kemps is a wholly owned subsidiary of Dairy Farmers of America (DFA). DFA is the largest dairy cooperative in the United States with national farmer membership. One hundred percent of our profits go to dairy farmers and their families.

What are the key trends affecting your industry?
The accelerating decline in the consumption of fluid milk is the major issue facing the dairy industry. Changing consumer demographics and behavior are causing significant declines in fluid milk sales. It is critical that we find ways to make milk more relevant to today’s consumer. The development of value-added dairy products that deliver on current consumer needs and desires is a priority.
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ing industry brings us to July 26, 2013, when he started full-time at Minnesota Agri-Growth Council. Based on the experiences previously detailed, it may be no surprise that the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council opening looks like the perfect fit for Aasness. “I think it fits the sweet-spot for my passions of the issues and agriculture,” he said.

Also making it an easy decision was the respect Perry had for the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council and high reputation of the institution. “I’ve been an Agri-Growth member for many years,” Aasness recalled, “because I’ve seen the value in what the organization represents, which is the diversity and the strength of the Minnesota food, fuel, and agriculture sector. Between all the crops and livestock the state raises, when you look at where we rank nationally in production and the economic impact we make, it starts at the farm level but is critical for so many businesses,” Aasness noted. “Many economic opportunities have been created because of the strength of the crop and livestock production sectors in this state.”

A 2012 Minnesota Department of Agriculture report noted that 7 of Minnesota’s top 20 public companies are in the farm and food sector, along with many top private companies. The state is 6th in total agriculture cash receipts and in the top 10 for 13 major crops and 7 major livestock sectors.

“One of Agri-Growth’s key roles is to serve as an advocate for the food and agriculture industry, and I see my job to build on that,” Aasness said. “There’s a role the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council needs to play so we can continue to ensure there’s a positive business climate in Minnesota for agriculture. We need to keep the key influencers; whether they are legislators, in administration, or other opinion-leaders; informed and with a favorable view of Minnesota’s agriculture industry.”

With the diversity, it’s hard to put a grade on how agriculture-friendly Minnesota is, but Aasness has a few principles he’d like to evaluate. “From the farm perspective, we want to make sure that our farmers have the freedom to operate so that they can be competitive both nationally and internationally. That perspective should be maintained all the way up through the food and ag sector, through regulations and tax policy, so that we’re not at a competitive disadvantage to other states.”

Staying competitive with other states is easy to understand, but Aasness also wants to ensure we’re not too competitive amongst ourselves. “Some people like to put agriculture in certain categories like big and small. But again, I think the strength of Minnesota agriculture is our diversity, in terms of production, markets, our agri-processing infrastructure, and related industries. There really is no one-size-fits-all approach. It comes down to ensuring Minnesota farmers and agribusinesses are allowed to produce for markets and maintain profitability in a competitive environment,” he explained. “Agriculture’s impact on Minnesota’s economy and culture is often underappreciated, but critically important, especially during a time when global food demand is expected to double by 2050. The technology and innovation being introduced and adopted at all levels truly make it an incredible time to be involved in today’s food and agriculture sector.”

ON THE RUN
Perry and his wife, Kim, stay busy with two daughters (Grace and Ava), ages 12 and 8, and a newborn son (Benjamin). Staying connected to the family farm fills much of his spare time. Although Aasness admits he’s certainly no full-time farmer, but he’ll jump at the prospect to get his hands dirty. “It’s very important for me to keep the farm opportunity, and it’s still where much of my heart is,” he said. His family time also consists of hunting near his farm along the Otter Tail River, where he enjoys deer, goose, and pheasant hunting, along with helping out with the Fall harvest.

If working full-time, raising three kids, and farming on the side wasn’t difficult enough, Aasness said he’s picked up another habit along the way. “I’m one of those crazy people who got the running bug. I’ve run 11 marathons, with number 12 coming this Fall in the Twin Cities Marathon. Call me either crazy or stupid, but it’s something I enjoy and a great way to decompress.”

Perry and his wife also try to stay active as volunteers with the church they attend, Eagle Brook Church in Woodbury.

SHARE YOUR STORIES
For Minnesota Agri-Growth Council members looking to learn how they can be involved, Aasness says his experiences show him that connections matter. “Whether it’s what I, our lobbyist Cory Bennett, or you – the individual members – do to build relationships and trust, those interactions are probably the most important things to uphold. The personal stories you can share about how existing legislation or regulation affect your business, or could potentially affect your business, can’t be underestimated.”

Clearly, Minnesota’s agriculture, food, and fuel industries has both a local and global impact in terms of creating jobs and opportunities across Minnesota. Agriculture is not a static industry, but one focused on continued improvement and innovation to take on the important task of helping feed the world. As Executive Director, Aasness says that they will work hard to continue to bring the perspective of the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council’s membership forward. But, he says your stories and faces can do a lot to bolster their positions with elected officials.

Talking with Perry on just his third day on the job, he was just getting acclimated to the office and keeping things in order. But he has a full plate in front of him, “We’ve got lots to do, our Annual Meeting is coming up on November 5th, and I want to both reach out to current members and look for potential members to join the organization. We’re going to be looking to see how we can enhance what we’re currently doing so that the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council can continue to have an impact and ensure value to membership into the future.”
Chew on This Tour will Make a Stop at the Minnesota State Fair

The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council is excited to announce that the Chew on This, Drive to Feed the World Tour will be making an appearance at the Minnesota State Fair! The Chew on This Tour, sponsored by Elanco and Nutra-Blend, is a unique, interactive road show traveling the nation to heighten awareness about one of the biggest problems facing our world today: hunger. World hunger is an important issue that requires everyone to do their part. Agriculture has made great strides, but the increasing global demand for food requires that we do more. While children go to bed hungry and people die from malnutrition, myths and misconceptions restrict innovation and our ability to meet the growing demand.

The tour has already been stopped at feed mills, universities, fairs and civic events around the country. Now they will have a chance to speak to Minnesotans at the “Great Minnesota Get-Together.” The Tour will stop at the Fair on August 31-September 2. For the weekend of the 31st and the 1st you can find the red Chew on This trailer - emblazoned with the spokesperson Bill Goldberg, former NFL lineman and champion wrestler - near the CHS Miracle of Birth Center. On Labor Day, the truck will move to Heritage Square. We hope you’ll take a minute and visit the Fair and stop by the Chew on This Truck!