The 36th Future Leaders Conference was hosted by AgChoice Farm Credit, ACA and Land O’Lakes, Inc. and held in Gettysburg, PA. Eight cooperatives sponsored 25 leaders and future leaders from 6 states to attend the event. Following a welcome by Cyndy Van Lieshout, NECC President, the group learned a bit more about each other, the importance of their sponsoring cooperative to their farm business, and where each one had travelled from with leadership provided by conference couple Andy and Katie Flinchbaugh.

BALANCING CONFIDENTIALITY AND THE INFORMED MEMBERSHIP
Gordon Hoover, Director of Member Relations for Land O’Lakes Inc. dove into the issues directors and managers face as they lead the cooperative. He noted that cooperative directors represent the membership, establish cooperative policies, hire and oversee the CEO, oversee acquisition and preservation of assets, preserve the cooperative character of the organization, assess the cooperative’s performance and inform members.

Informed members participate constructively in the cooperative by supporting and promoting the organization. They drive accountability through board elections and staff performance. Member information is guided by the director’s fiduciary responsibilities and confidentiality agreements and ethics supporting board decisions, the cooperative, its employees and members. Majority rules in a cooperative and a silent majority will trump a vocal minority. It is important the members elect leaders and delegates who are honest, have integrity, and are educated. An example of a conflict of interest and confidentiality agreement was shared with the future leaders.

THE BOARD IS IN SESSION
Ed Schoen, Dairy Farmers of America board member, shared insights into the role of the director and tips for board room etiquette. The duties of care, loyalty, and obedience were shared and then the group split into 4 ‘boards of directors’ to address situations described in 8 case studies.

LINCON ON LEADERSHIP
Jim Getty, Lincoln actor and historian spoke to the group following the evening meal. He talked about the elements of perseverance that make a difference.

- Right approach—ready to work and a positive attitude
- Strong will to succeed—both genetic and learned behavior with an internal drive and fire within to bring personal satisfaction as one leads a group to success.
- Passion—loving what one does, carries one through in difficult times.
- Desire to compete—competition is both internal and external. Self-evaluation will build strength out of weakness. Compete with your team to maintain your edge.
- Consistency—be willing to adjust as situations evolve; be ready to perform each day; quickly finding solutions makes one irreplaceable.
- Conviction—one needs to have a thick skin and at times be stubborn in order to see things through to the end.
- Physical and mental strength—understand the link between exercise and maintaining focus
COOPERATIVES ARE UNIQUE
AgChoice Farm Credit President and CEO, Darrell Curtis provided a brief overview of the cooperative business structure. Cooperative success is founded on the close connection and the success of customers as owners. He shared the scorecard upon which AgChoice evaluates and measures the goals of the organization. He mentioned the ways that cooperatives work to understand the needs of their members through Leadership Advisory Councils, customer appreciation events, board of directors, and employees attuned to customers needs. He highlighted the business consulting services provided by AgChoice for their members along with programs available for young, beginning and small farmers with particular focus on the AgBiz Masters learning series and Smart Start.

MY ROLE, MY RESPONSIBILITY, MY SERVICE
AgChoice Farm Credit Board Chairman Brandon Weary shared information on the evolution of his family farm business and his role as a cooperative director. Being a director allows one to “use leadership skills that you have developed and grow yourself professionally.” Personal qualities that will make a person a successful director include honesty, integrity, respect, and confidentiality. Director responsibilities include attending all meetings, being prepared for board meetings and events, provide strategic direction, be engaged, commit to learning, and hire and work closely with the CEO. He concluded his remarks with a quote from Shari Harley, “You are 100% accountable for your career, your happiness and well for everything!”

COOPERATIVES REPRESENTED DURING ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS INCLUDED:
- AgChoice Farm Credit, ACA—Darrell Curtis & Brandon Weary
- Adams Electric Cooperative, Inc.—Kami Noel
- Genex—Alfred Wanner
- Dairy Farmers of America—Ed Schoen
- Cumberland Valley Cooperative—Joel Theis
- Upstate Niagara Cooperative Inc.—Cyndy Van Lieshout
COOPERATIVES MANAGING CHANGE
Craig Hinkle, Vice President and Treasurer, Knouse Foods shared information on how the cooperative has adapted to and invested in new technologies through time as the industry has changed and as the needs of the orchardists who provide product to the cooperative have changed. He showed pictures of the mechanization of processes such as peeling apples and the move from outside seasonal storage to controlled-atmosphere storage. He talked about the most recent investment in a water treatment facility at the headquarters facility in Peach Glen, PA. Members of Knouse Foods are not required to sell all the fruit from the farm to the cooperative. There are certain sales thresholds that members adhere to in order to be eligible for a seat on the board of directors.

MEMBERS DRIVE THE COOPERATIVE
Jack Martin, Land O'Lakes member reflected on his experience as a unit delegate. He told the group to pick out a person to emulate. He said, “You’re not representing a chunk of milk, your representing people.” In his role he works to help members understand the cooperative. As a leader it is important to “be humble, honest, inspire others, trust, be innovative and think outside of the box.” “To be successful, it is important to surround yourself with successful people. As one interacts with other people making decisions, it will improve your decision making skills as well. Being part of a leadership team off the farm can put you in better standing with your family and others such as your finance officer will view and talk to you differently.”

GETTYSBURG LEADERSHIP SEMINAR
Tom Vossler, Licensed Battlefield Guide with the Gettysburg Foundation lead future leaders around the Gettysburg Battlefield. He explained the symbolism of some of the statues viewed by the group. He shared insights about the battle and the personalities involved. Events leading up to and during the battle were both happenstance and calculated. Vossler used small group discussions to share the lessons learned from the field that can be applied to critical decisions made by today’s leaders. General Chamberlain was a key military leader, who preferred not to follow the directives of General Lee, to the detriment of the Confederate position—it is important that the leadership team have agreement on an implementation plan to achieve a common goal. Communications broke down resulting in unreliable information upon which to make decisions—when everyone knows the goal they will act accordingly to achieve the goal. In spite of constantly changing situations, decisions have to be made—while more information is always desirable, decide when you have 60 percent of the information you need and make the decision as timing is critical. On Day 3 of the battle, the temperatures rose to 90° with water and food at a premium. Union artillery was positioned to the detriment of Confederate infantrymen. Confederate officers encouraged the men by saying, “Home boys, home is just over that hill.” The inference being that if they captured Cemetery Ridge, the battle and war would be won and the men could go home—when leading a team, shared values motivate you attain the goal.