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## **625 Dairy Farms Lost in Massachusetts in the past 25 years!**

**Less than 200 remain today, but they maintain most of the farmland and open space in the state**

During recent decades, dairy farm numbers in Massachusetts have plummeted, changing the landscape of New England's most visible rural and historic state.

In the past 25 years alone, the number of dairy farms in Massachusetts has gone from 812 to just 187 today, a decline of more than 77%! Low farm milk prices and rising costs of production, including skyrocketing energy costs, taxes and health care costs have forced local farm families out of business. Those that remain want to preserve a Massachusetts way of life that goes back to before the Revolutionary War.

"We just can't survive on 1981 milk prices and 2007 costs," says dairy farmer Chip Hager of Colrain, Mass., who milks 125 cows on 1,500 acres of owned and rented land with his wife Sherry, daughter Kim and her fiancé Aaron. "Everything we purchase to keep our operation running has gone up in price, but our milk price, which is determined monthly by USDA, keeps going down and last year was at the same level it was 25 years ago."

Dairy farmers in the state, including Hager, have petitioned the Commissioner of Agriculture to hold emergency hearings and to take action to help the struggling farm families. They are behind a proposed plan to make \$12 million in direct state payments to farmers, much like surrounding states such as Vermont, Maine and Connecticut have done. Dairying is the third largest agricultural industry in Massachusetts, accounting for more than \$50 million in annual cash receipts that is then circulated many times throughout the state's rural economies.

Hearings dates were just recently scheduled for March 16<sup>th</sup> at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Campus Center Auditorium 10:00 am to 4:00 pm and for March 20th at Faneuil Hall on Congress Street in Boston from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm.

The state's dairy farmers have organized under the label the Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers (MADF) to help them work cohesively as they seek methods to increase farm milk revenues and consumer and industry awareness of their efforts.

"We need both farmers and consumers and those involved in and related to the dairy industry to get to these hearings," says dairy farmer Gordon Cook of Hadley, president of MADF. "We are at a crucial point in history here in Massachusetts. If more farms go out of business retail milk prices will continue to climb as more milk is trucked in from New York, Ohio and other states West of us. That won't be good for farmers, consumers or the residents of the state. When farms disappear, the many local jobs they provide disappear as well."

The average Massachusetts farm milks about 100 cows that produce about 200,000 gallons  
(more)

per year due to the great effort and efficiency of the farms. The price decline of \$.22 per gallon in the past year translates into a \$44,000 decline in annual income for an average farm family. Compared with two years ago, that income decline will exceed \$100,000 per farm. 2006 farm milk prices were also among the lowest received by farmers in the past 25 years.

In fact, the USDA milk price for Massachusetts farmers was \$1.20 per gallon for their milk in the summer of 1981, \$.05 per gallon more than 2006 farm prices! A USDA milk income loss payment program is in place, but it did not even bring Massachusetts farmers near to their 1981 prices.

Just as farm milk prices collapsed, milk production and transportation costs skyrocketed in 2006 and continue into 2007. Keep in mind that dairy farmers pay to have their milk hauled to dairy plants every day or two in addition to all the energy and fertilizer costs incurred on the farm itself. The increase alone in these costs on the average farm far exceeded \$30,000 in 2006 and that will compound the income crisis! Multi-generational Massachusetts farms, often supporting several adult families and milking several hundred cows, will see their income and costs affected proportionately and could lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in 2006 and 2007.

This crisis is not caused in any way by Massachusetts dairy farmers nor can it be corrected by them. The milk price decline is caused by tremendous increases in milk production on huge factory-like dairy operations, often milking thousands of cows each in states like New Mexico, Texas, Idaho and California. Driven by these expanding Western factory farms, U.S. milk production was up last year and continues to be up today, even though Massachusetts farmers are producing less milk.

Unfortunately, USDA uses national supply and demand conditions to price milk throughout the country, including Massachusetts and New England. The irony is that if fresh milk had to be transported from those Western states, it would cost Massachusetts consumers more than paying local farms a fair price that would cover their costs!

Massachusetts dairy farms provide much more than just milk to the state's citizens. These farms are the primary stewards of agricultural open space in the state. They create a diverse working landscape for the recreational and scenic enjoyment of their neighbors and visiting tourists. They economically support local businesses and rural communities. Combined, Massachusetts family farms produce more than 33 million gallons of fresh milk annually. The state's dairy industry in its entirety generates more than \$500 million in economic activity!

"Massachusetts needs a long-term solution that is good for farmers, consumers and everybody else involved in this important industry," says economist Robert Wellington of the Agri-Mark dairy cooperative, which markets the majority of farm milk in the state. "Dairy farmers take in roughly \$50 million income but unlike most other industries, they spend it all locally, year after year. Massachusetts is also home to many large dairy plants that process fresh drinking milk and manufacture high quality ice cream, yogurt, butter and other dairy products from nearby fresh milk. The economic impact of the industry is more like hundreds of millions of dollars annually for the Massachusetts economy."

The MADF says the dairy hearings are very important to everyone in Massachusetts and urges people to please try to attend in support of the local farm families that provide so many benefits to the state.