

Graywall Farms

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Testimony of Robin A. Chesmer in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 504
An Act Establishing A Price Support System For Milk Produced In Connecticut
And in SUPPORT of HB 6410
An Act Preserving Connecticut's Farmland

I am here today in support of every effort to increase the funding and efficiency of Connecticut's Farmland Preservation Program and especially to improve the speed of farmland protection efforts. House Bill 6410 addresses these issues. The Farmland Preservation Program is a valuable tool that is vitally needed to maintain a viable agricultural land base in Connecticut. It is especially important to the dairy industry which farms the largest portion of our states agricultural land base.

Equally important to preserving the land is to make sure we have farmers to work the land. Senate Bill 505 works to address this issue. The simple truth is that Connecticut's dairy industry is in a serious crisis. Dairy farms all over the state, large and small, have been ravaged and brutalized by the extreme economic and weather conditions of 2006. Economically, Connecticut and the Northeast is the victim of an inequitable Federal Milk Pricing Policy that does not consider regional differences in cost of production. In the dairy industry we are *Price Takers.....Not Price Makers.....*we can't pass on increased costs of production that, for example, result from skyrocketing energy costs. On top of all this, the weather in 2006 was miserable and resulted in drastically reduced yields. On my farm we would usually have a feed inventory that would last until next January. This year we are stretching our forages with byproducts such as distiller grains and we will be fortunate if our feed lasts until September.

The financial stresses on the dairy industry are enormous – there just isn't enough money to pay the bills – suppliers are finding it equally difficult as payments lag behind and farms drastically reduces purchases. Cost-cutting has been taken to the maximum – there just isn't any more room to cut expenses. Dairy farmers are refinancing, selling land or taking off-farm jobs so they can pay their operating bills. If Connecticut's dairy farms face another year like 2006 they just simply won't be able to operate any longer.

There are a lot of young farmers in Connecticut that want to continue the operation of their family farm. I personally am fortunate to have both a son and son-in-law that farm as a career. As a state, we can't afford to waste the

valuable resource of the next generation of farmers that will operate our farms and steward the land. We need to fix the economic problem now.

Our farm is one of six Connecticut family farms that have joined together to market their milk under the label of The Farmer's Cow. The consumer response has been wonderful and demonstrates the appreciation people have for Connecticut agriculture. We embarked on this endeavor to try and control our destiny and improve the economic well-being of our farms. Hopefully, the demand for The Farmer's Cow milk will grow to the point that it can benefit other farms as well. To undertake a project like The Farmer's Cow demands a lot of time, money and patience as it is a completely different business that takes time to develop. Other farms have created agri-tourism type businesses or developed a product or service business to supplement the farm revenues. This is all fine, however, the reality is that it really is a full-time job just to operate a farm. There are a lot of excellent farmers in Connecticut who don't have the time or desire to operate another business. All dairy farm operations should be able to make a living and cover the expenses of their farm business from doing what they do best – farming.

Thank you for your consideration and efforts to keep farmers on the land. Please move ahead quickly with Senate Bill 504.