

## LexisNexis™ Academic

Copyright 2006 The **Hartford Courant** Company  
**Hartford Courant** (Connecticut)

April 14, 2006 Friday  
5 NORTHWEST CONNECTICUT/SPORTS FINAL EDITION

**SECTION:** CONNECTICUT; Pg. B1

**LENGTH:** 583 words

**HEADLINE:** STATE MILK FARMERS: GOT HOPE?

**BYLINE:** Rick Green

**BODY:**

As you reach for that carton of milk at the supermarket, consider this: Connecticut dairy farmers are getting ripped off.

Greedy retailers and giant over-producing dairy farms in the West, combined with higher energy and fertilizer costs, mean farmers are losing as much as 30 cents off the price it costs them to produce a gallon.

Some of our beleaguered farmers are fighting back. They are not going to save a dying industry, but the half-dozen dairymen behind the new Farmer's Cow brand want you to think -- and pay a little more for their milk.

``We think we have a better product," Bill Peracchio told me during an afternoon tour of his hilltop farm in Coventry. ``It's fresh."

There are only about 170 dairy farms left in the state, nearly half what we saw a dozen years ago. The price farmers are paid for their milk is now so low that many could go out of business, their cows replaced by another cul de sac of McMansions.

``You've seen the price of milk in stores. The farmers aren't getting the [benefit of] the higher price," said Phil Prelli, Connecticut's agriculture commissioner. ``It is costing them more to produce the milk right now than they are getting for it."

You might guess a gallon might cost less since the price farmers receive has plummeted. No, the average price for a gallon of whole milk is \$3.75, unchanged as supermarkets and convenience stores rake in the higher profits.

``They are gouging," said state Rep. George Wilber, D-Colebrook, a former dairy farmer and agriculture commissioner under Ella Grasso. ``When the price of milk goes down, [stores] don't lower their prices."

When local farms are gone, ``where's the milk going to come from?" Wilber said. ``What happens if there

is some kind of disaster and you are going to be depending on milk coming from Ohio?"

I know what you amateur economists are thinking -- if farmers in the Midwest and West can produce milk cheaper, so be it. Under the complicated federal price structure for milk, surpluses from industrial farms in the West are driving the price down.

But milk isn't like Nikes, made cheap in Asia and shipped here. Western milk can't be trucked to Connecticut -- it's too expensive and it won't be fresh. But our farmers must still sell at the federally mandated lower price.

University of Connecticut economist Ronald W. Cotterill says farmers should get more of the profits from milk sales. He'd like to see federal or state legislation that accounts for the higher costs of producing milk in the Northeast.

``Why is it that the retailer gets a price far in excess of his cost?" Cotterill asked. ``You are not going to have a farm left in New England."

If government control of prices scares you, how do you feel about open space, wildlife habitat and scenic vistas that make Connecticut unique? You can thank dairy farmers for those things. Our free market doesn't include them in the price we pay for milk.

Milking 200 cows at 4 a.m. and 4 p.m. every day, Peracchio and his brother Tom aren't interested in living on as a museum, preserved because somebody likes the idea of cows, red tractors and rolling meadows.

``We should still be efficient producers of the product," said Peracchio, whose milk is sold at Stop & Shop, Price Chopper and Highland Park markets. ``But it may come to the point where we can't afford to stay here."

It's something to think about, the next time you open the refrigerator.

Rick Green's column appears on Tuesdays and Fridays. He can be reached at [rgreen@courant.com](mailto:rgreen@courant.com)

**LOAD-DATE:** April 14, 2006