



Tuesday, May 6 on News 8 WMTW at 6
A Way of Life: A Special Report by Lisa Gardner

Thursday, May 8, 2003, 8:46 AM



Dairy farming in Maine has reached a crisis point. Twenty years ago there were about 1,500 thriving farms in Maine. Today there are 400 and more are on the way out.

**By Lisa Gardner
News 8 WMTW**

Every farmer in Maine is losing money every day and has been for the past year and a half because historically low milk prices. And while the average business person might say if you're not making a profit you have to get out -- for Maine farmers it's not so easy. It's more than just a job, it's a way of life.

Taking a leisurely stroll around their pond in Appleton is something neighbors never catch Melvin and Carol Raven doing -- at least not until now.

"You know when we started in this barn we put in six stalls at a time," Melvin said.

The Ravens ran a dairy farm for years, putting in 14 to 20-hour days. They didn't have time for much else.

"We never had a vacation until we were married 25 years," Melvin said. But now all that's changed. The old milking stalls are empty. The barn once busy with cows and kids is full of old cars. And trucks and the fields that fattened the stock are quiet.

The price of milk had dropped so low, the Ravens decided to get out before it was too late. All that's left now are these old photos.

"We could see the handwriting on the wall and we heard the horror stories - farmers had worked their whole life on farms and would never, ever get out of debt and I could just see ourselves losing everything," Melvin said

"It was hard- like I said before - they were my babies. I cried when they left. And it was hard watching them be loaded on a truck," Carol said.

Thirty-two other farmers have made that same gut-wrenching decision in the just the last year and a half. That's because the price of milk has been at a record low. Since September 2001 farmers have been spending about 30 percent more to produce milk than they're getting paid for it.

"When we sold those cows I would've bet the price of milk would get better," Melvin said. "But I was totally wrong. It went right back the other way. How anybody's farming today is more than I know."

Those who have stayed in say they're simply going deeper in debt.

Dale Cole runs a dairy farm in Sidney that's been in the family for decades.

"The building needs repair and they're not getting it. It's the way we balance it," Cole said. "We'll continue and I'll decide when to quit and I'm not much for quitting."

In fact, rather than quit, Cole has become an unofficial lobbyist -- pushing the governor and legislature for help. He and others in the business have asked the governor to create a fund to help farmers by imposing a milk tax on retailers -- one the retailers would undoubtedly pass on to consumers.

"I think it's important the state not have any additional taxes in order to make Maine more competitive," said Gov. John Baldacci.

So instead of a tax, the governor's come up with his own Dairy Relief Plan. For the next eight months farmers will receive payments totaling \$7 million. He wants to create a program that'll help farmers develop plans to stay in business for the long haul. And he's creating a task force to come up with recommendations on how to keep the industry alive. A plan farmers hope will help save their livelihood before too many more farms disappear.

"I said to one old farmer one time - 'how's it feel to be retired?' He says, 'well, except for my life's work being over it isn't too bad.' He didn't like the idea of his life's work being over and I guess I don't either," Melvin said.

The Maine Dairy Industry conducted a survey where they asked more than 600 Mainers if they would be willing to pay more for milk to help Maine's dairy farmers -- 94 percent said they would.

Click on the link above to read the rest of the survey.

Lisa Gardner can be contacted at lgardner@wmtw.com.

Adelphia



All content © Copyright 2000 - 2003 WorldNow and WMTW. All Rights Reserved.
For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).