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## Farmers confront crisis

### Plans made to try to stave off dairy farms' demise

By **Bradford L. Miner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF**  
[bminer@telegram.com](mailto:bminer@telegram.com)

**STURBRIDGE**— It was billed as a “Massachusetts Dairy Crisis Meeting,” and 175 men and women from across the state took a break from milking and farm chores yesterday morning and converged on Rom’s Restaurant to listen to initiatives for short- and long-term relief.

Wearing flannel shirts, blue jeans, boots and baseball caps, these members of the Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers from the Berkshires to the coast presented a united front in the effort to stave off the demise of the state’s dairy industry.

Several speakers painted the crisis with a broad brush, saying the \$1.14 a gallon paid to farmers this year for milk is 4 cents lower than the \$1.18 a gallon they received in 1981.

No one needed to remind them of the changing Massachusetts landscape, and vanishing dairy farmers.

Where there were 800 working dairy farms in the state a quarter-century ago, there are now 186, of which a third might be lost without some kind of state-backed relief.

Robert D. Wellington, economist for the AgriMark Dairy Cooperative, detailed the combined effect of increased feed and energy costs this year, weather problems that wreaked havoc with hay crops in spring 2006 and the collapse of prices paid to farmers for their milk.

“If you take home with you anything from this meeting today, it’s that we have to put forward a united effort. The remaining 186 dairy farms in Massachusetts, presenting one plan, one message to the state, cannot be ignored,” said Darryl Williams, who milks 100 cows on his farm in Hatfield.

Mr. Williams said farmers have to become proactive, and in addition to running their farms, have to speak on plans for immediate short-term relief of \$12 million that will allow farmers to buy fertilizer and seed for the coming year, and seek legislation for long-term relief that will maintain a price of \$18 per hundredweight, or \$1.55 a gallon.

“It doesn’t matter whether you milk 30 cows or 500, whether you’re organic or not, whether you use BST (artificial cow growth hormone) or not. Everyone has to be on the same page,” Mr. Williams said.

State Sen. Stephen M. Brewer, D-Barre, said a supplementary budget before the Legislature might be the vehicle to provide the \$12 million in short-term financial relief for dairy farms, and he encouraged all present to call state Sen. Therese Murray, chairwoman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee.

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“You need to get on the Ways and Means radar, and not just with your immediate concerns of costs and revenues. Every Massachusetts dairy farm is a viable economic multiplier, conserving open space, encouraging agri-tourism, providing recreational opportunities for sportsmen,” Mr. Brewer said.

“Remember that democracy is not a spectator sport. If you want to turn this crisis around, you need to make yourself heard,” the senator said.

Mr. Brewer said he has filed an act promoting the viability of farms in the commonwealth and legislation that would establish maximum retail milk prices.

The final component of the long-term legislative initiative would be the establishment of an Open Space Preservation Fund that, as a dedicated fund of the state Department of Agricultural Resources, would provide a source from which money could be distributed to dairy farmers on a monthly basis — based upon milk prices — to foster the preservation of open space, environmental stewardship and tourism, and the quality of life associated with an agrarian culture.

Michael C. Stumo, a Sheffield lawyer working with the state’s dairy farmers, said other New England states have been successful in providing relief for farmers, and that while Vermont and Connecticut had come up with short-term relief to counter 2006 financial losses, Maine had embarked on a long-term relief program in conjunction with a small retail tax on milk.

“One thing is certain, and that is if we lose these farms, we know we can’t get them back,” Mr. Stumo said.

Mr. Wellington said another facet of the problem was educating consumers.

“They are simply out of touch with what happens on dairy farms. All they know is what they have to pay when they go to the supermarket for a gallon of milk that may cost between \$3 and \$4 a gallon,” Mr. Wellington said.

He also said the problem required extraordinary measures because of competition from outside New England.

“This year, Colorado surpassed Vermont in the production of milk, and who would think of Colorado as a dairy state?” the AgriMark economist asked.

Those present were asked to circulate petitions in support of the state’s dairy farmers, asking signers to call upon Gov. Deval L. Patrick and the Legislature to provide short-term relief and stating their willingness to pay several cents more for each gallon of milk if the money were dedicated to the support of the state’s remaining dairy farms.

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