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Regarding Cohen's Dairy Disdain

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With understatement typical of his mien, Laurence D. Cohen [Other Opinion, April 17, "Time To Put Dairy Farmers Out To Pasture"] has hit the nail on the head. Unfortunately, the hammer rebounded and hit Cohen on the nose. The corrupt milk fiasco that Cohen apparently envisions is unlike the Teapot Dome scandal.

Milk price supports are unofficial yet legitimate corollaries of the farmland preservation program in the state. Is this preservation program corrupt? Should we just let markets take over and have condos, houses, tar roads and the need for more schools be the accepted norms?

People and pols seem to agree: We apparently want some open space in the state. Milk prices are only the tip of the iceberg. Keeping land in farms and non-developed property limits population growth - I thought that meant better living comfort. It reduces the need for schools, places that employ teachers belonging to that Cohen nemesis: the brutish National Education Association.

There is less SUV exhaust from land not teeming with condos, too.

Cohen should look at the whole picture, not just a bottle of milk. Completeness can set him free.

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Dairy farmers are not to blame for the high cost of milk these days. Yes, there are price subsidies, as there are for most commodity crops in the United States, but it is supermarkets that mark up the price and charge consumers ridiculous amounts for milk.

The proposed legislation "An Act Concerning the Fair Price of Milk" sets a percentage-increase cap for retailers. It does very little to help farmers, but will help consumers.

By the way, Connecticut dairy farmers do pretty well. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2001, we were No.2 in New England for milk production and value per square mile. Nationwide, we are No.8 in density of dairy cows per acre and No.9 in milk production per dairy cow (second highest in 2001 of all states east of Colorado). That's 249 glasses of nutrient-filled Connecticut milk per person per year.

And although Cohen thinks that farmers should sell their land to condo developers, Connecticut is losing farmland at a rate of thousands of acres per year. We have some of the best farmland on Earth and we should support its preservation.

Someday, in this overpopulated, polluted and dangerous world, we may need to rely on local agriculture much more than we do now.

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Cohen omitted what is at the core of dairying: a special class of diligent workers.

Dairy farmers typically work 12-hour days, six or seven days per week. They keep working until the job is done, even when they are quite tired. Many of the rest of us work long hours, but not every day for years on end.

Milk is a valued commodity. The Northeast Dairy Compact was put in place to establish a minimum price for milk, recognizing the higher costs of dairying in New England. Mr. Cohen's assertion that dairy farming should be limited to states where it can be accomplished more cheaply ignores the value of keeping skilled family farm labor here in Connecticut.

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