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Farmers say bill that would give tax breaks desperately needed

By JENNIFER HICKS

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Farmers are giving positive feedback about a proposed new bill that would help them financially.

State Rep. Steve Mikutel, D-Griswold, has moved to protect Connecticut's farmers through a bill that would make certain farm buildings property tax exempt.

"This legislation would protect one of our most valuable natural resources, working farmland," Mikutel said.

Farms that once dominated Connecticut are dwindling at high rates. Mikutel believes property tax relief the legislation would provide would help farmers survive.

"Giving farmers a tax break encourages agriculture and preserves farmland. It is a way to help farmers who struggle with costs and increasingly find themselves enticed by developers looking to make a dollar with developments on their land," Mikutel said.

"Every little bit helps," said Courtland Kinnie, owner of a hay and crop farm in Griswold.

Kinnie said farms, barns, and old carriage sheds are the character of New England. Farmers desperately need monetary help or all of those things will disappear, he said.

The Kinnie family has lived on that land for 100 years he said.

"We're hanging on," Kinnie said. "Hopefully we're going to pass this on to the next generation."

If Mikutel's bill passes, Connecticut would join Vermont, Louisiana and North Dakota, in providing for a municipal option to abate property taxes on farm buildings. Mikutel's tax break would equal up to \$100,000 on the assessed farm property value.

"This legislation would allow a town to not only help its remaining farmers to survive and help to bolster our state's agricultural industry, but give residents greater control in protecting the rural character of their community," Mikutel said.

On the Web

For links to the University of Connecticut's Web site regarding dairy farms, visit <http://www.are.uconn.edu/fmktc.html>

Byron Gallup, a dairy farmer from Voluntown, said the proposed bill will help.

"We need all the help we can get right now due to the poor price we're receiving for the milk," Gallup said. "It's never been this low for this long."

Gallup said he gets about \$12 for every 100 pounds of dairy. About a year ago, however, he was getting \$16 and \$17 before July, he said.

"They tell us not to see any changes until later this year," he said.

"We're not receiving enough to cover production and insurance costs and pay for our help and feed. We've been below operating expenses all winter."

University of Connecticut agricultural economist Ronald Cotterill explained how retail has an impact on the dairy industry.

"The price of milk in Connecticut has been at a 20 year low for a year and a half now," Cotterill said. "Farmers are getting 98 cents per gallon, but they need \$1.40 to break even."

Cotterill did a study that found average from \$3.10 gal and farmer's getting \$1.04 a gallon. To break it down, he said the process costs 58 cents, and retailers pay \$1.49.

"Retailers are making out indeed," he said, adding that in store costs are only 32 cents a gallon. "The farmer is simply not getting enough of the consumer's dollar at this point. The retailer is taking too much."

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