

## March 27 Program

A very interesting program on “Why are Connecticut dairy farmers having such a hard time and what can be done about it?” was held March 27 at the Lyme Public Hall before a packed room of concerned individuals from Lyme and surrounding towns. Jennie Contois, district director for Congressman Joe Courtney, shared a statement expressing his support for Connecticut dairy farmers and his efforts on the federal level to address dairy issues and energy issues. Bonnie Burr, spokesperson for Connecticut farmers, and dairy farmers Joe and Melissa Greenbacker of Brookfield Farm of Durham and Jack Tiffany from Lyme discussed the hardship Connecticut dairy farmers face today. Connecticut State Representative Marilyn Giuliano gave an update on the state legislative initiatives on the table to help ensure the viability of CT dairy farmers. Marilyn Giuliano has been working hard to encourage her colleagues to pass these measures.

Bonnie Burr explained that the most recent trouble for dairy farmers started in 2005. Federally regulated minimum wholesale milk prices dropped at the same time that expenses went way up. Energy costs to turn on the lights and run the milking equipment have gone through the roof, and fuel costs to run tractors and equipment are equally as high. Corn seed which farmers use as feed grain and for crops to be harvested for chopped silage is very expensive due to increased corn utilization for ethanol production in the Midwest.

The milk price decline is caused by tremendous increases in milk production on huge dairy operations, often milking thousands and thousands of cows on a single farm in states like New Mexico, Texas, Idaho and California. The quality of the milk from these operations is affected by the use of chemicals to artificially increase the cow’s production and to keep them healthy in confined areas. The irony is if fresh milk had to be transported from those western states, it would cost Connecticut consumers more than paying local farms a fair price that would cover their costs!

The price paid to dairy farmers under the federal order system in 2006 was lower than it was twenty-five years ago in 1981. Farmers all over the state were losing several thousands of dollars a month.

Joe Greenbacker’s Brookfield Farm is an example of how the State Farmland Preservation program is meant to work. He bought his dairy farm twenty years ago from a retiring farmer who had sold his development rights to the State. He was able to buy the land at the agricultural value price and set up a profitable dairy farm with his family, including daughter Melissa. However, the recent 2005 and 2006 setback in wholesale prices caused him to lose about \$100,000 in income.

Jack Tiffany noted how the decline in the dairy industry has a ripple effect on suppliers of feed and seed, veterinarians, and other related industries. He expressed his gratitude to the community for their support after it had become known that his farm had suffered from the loss in anticipated income in the past 2 years.

In Connecticut, there were 367 dairy farms in 1990. In 2006 that number dropped to 167. In the last few months the wholesale price has risen giving farmers some relief, but it is hard to overcome the sustained losses during 2006 and there are no guarantees that prices will remain stable. If dairy farmers are to survive here, the income they depend upon must be stabilized.

Three bills are proposed in the State legislature to address dairy farm viability.

SB1155: AN ACT CONCERNING DAIRY FARM PRESERVATION will provide one-time emergency funding to distressed dairy farms based on the milk production per farm during calendar year 2006. This is to replace income lost by the drop in the federally set wholesale prices. SB1257: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A MILK HANDLER FEE SYSTEM will ensure that the farmer receives a fair share of the profit from milk sales. When the wholesale price dropped during 2005 and 2006, the retail price charged to consumers actually rose. This bill will create a sliding fee that the “handler“ who buys the milk from the farmer pays into a fund if the wholesale price drops below a set state level. The fee money collected is given back to the farmer to make up the difference to equal a fair price. The profit margin for both parties remains consistent. SB1356: AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CONNECTICUT MILK COMMISSION, which, among other things, will establish the fair price to be paid to farmers for milk.

At the end of the program, letters to key and local state legislators to support these bills were available for signing. (A copy of this letter is attached.) Senator Eileen Daily’s vote is very important. She is on the finance committee and has not expressed a position on these bills. If you have not already signed the letter to her, please consider sending one.

Many Connecticut farmers, including Jack Tiffany and Joe Greenbacker, are members of Agri-mark, a Northeast Dairy Farm Cooperative, which produces Cabot cheese. Jack Tiffany’s milk is processed and distributed by Guida’s. By buying these products, you support Connecticut farms.