

Testimony to MA Dept Ag Resources 3/20/07

From: Warren Chamberlain
Legislative Director, Massachusetts State Grange

To: Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources.

Subject: Public hearing on Massachusetts Dairy Farm Crises

Date: March 20 2007, Faneuil Hall Boston MA.

To whom it may concern;

My name is Warren Chamberlain and I live at 16 Roy Ave in Holliston Massachusetts. I am presenting this testimony both as an individual and in my capacity as the Legislative Director of the Massachusetts State Grange.

The Grange is a National Farm Family Fraternity with membership in 37 of the 50 states with a National Headquarters in Washington DC and a state wide membership of about 3,000 members in approximately 100 local and regional chapters in the Commonwealth.

Otherwise known as the Patrons of Husbandry, both our long history and our future are intimately connected to the health and well being of the agricultural industry in our commonwealth and our nation. Although only a few of our current members are actively engaged directly in the agricultural industry as producers, we are still intimately aware of the difficulties farmers have to remain in the agricultural industry locally and be able to continue to supply us, as consumers, with fresh food, produced locally from our own soil.

My experience with the dairy industry began with my childhood growing up near and working on my grandfather's dairy farm in Needham MA. At that time there were four active dairy producers in Needham with at least two of them retail operations delivering the milk daily to our doorstep. My family members were all active Grangers, but over the years I watched sadly as urban and suburban sprawl began to march across my town and now all agricultural resources but one small market garden are gone.

In our Grange ritual it says, "Since God placed man on earth, agriculture has existed. There is no occupation that precedes it, no order or association that can rank with the tillers of the soil. Before literature existed, before governments were known, agriculture has been the calling of man and all the fruits of social progress since then have grown from the brown soil"

Today we see the growth of large cities with millions of people that need to eat every day but as the cities get bigger and bigger, where are we going to grow the food to feed them all?

Of course as the rural character of our towns began to disappear so did many of the chapters of our organization whose primary mission is to enhance the quality of rural family life. Agriculture is the building block of our country, but traditional agricultural production takes place primarily in rural communities. As our population grows we do need to build houses for them someplace, but we also have to balance the need for housing with the need to feed this growing population efficiently.

There is an inherent conflict over the way we allocate our use of land and our other natural resources.

Although we are aware that all agricultural producers have a continuing struggle to stay productively and profitably employed in the entire Northeast Region, because of increased costs of operation, we are also painfully aware that the dairy industry at this particular time is under severe pressure and is clearly in a crisis condition in Massachusetts.

But it is not just about saving a few dairy farms from extinction it is about preserving a way of life that is traditional to not only the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but the entire New England area.

It is important to our commonwealth to continue to be able to provide a consistent dependable and quality supply of local wholesome milk, and not have to become more and more dependent on milk and other agricultural products that would have to be imported from other parts of the country at much greater expense, considering the high cost of fuel for transportation. If we lose any more of our dairy farmers because of the big disparity between the price the dairies are able to get for the milk they produce at the wholesale level and the increased costs of maintaining the cows that produce that milk that is what is going to happen and we will end up paying more for our milk at the retail level in the long run, but it will not be as fresh and wholesome as it is now.

But it is not just the production of fresh milk that is in danger; there are a lot of other good reasons to keep dairy farms in profitable operation. Many communities are concerned about how they can maintain the rural characters of their suburban towns as well as they can by supporting programs that are designed to protect the environment and open spaces. It is nice to have open space for bird sanctuaries and spotted turtles, but I can think of no better way to keep open spaces open than keeping them as active pastures with actual cows grazing on them and working hay fields.

Although farmers are generally a very conservative lot and would prefer, as we would, a more market driven solution to this problem it seems that more often than not it may become necessary for government agencies and legislatures at the state as well as the national to intervene in the agricultural sector, if for no other reason than its vital importance to our national security and independence as a people.

I respectfully request that your agency and any other agencies of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts seek to find some way of addressing this crisis at this time and more permanent solutions that will help us to avoid such crises in the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to be heard in this matter.

Respectfully submitted, Warren Chamberlain

Legislative Director
Massachusetts State Grange P.O.H.