

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial affairs; Senator Ingwersen, Representative Plueker and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee.

I am Libby Bleakney, one of four owners of Highland Farms. We are located in Cornish in Northern York county. We farm 240 acres of open space & cropland, 1,00 acres of woodland, and 490 cows with 250 milking Jersey cattle. Our farm is the oldest registered jersey herd in the nation. Established in 1886. Currently the farm is operated by the 5th and 6th generations. Our 7th generation are just becoming interested in the farm.

As one of the largest landowners in the town overlooking New Hampshire's White Mountains and Mount Washington. The scenic view attracts many visitors. Sharing our open space is important to us and our woodlands offer all forms of recreation, such as skiing, snow shoeing, snowmobiling, hunting and hiking. Some come just to enjoy the view and the exceptional sunrises and sunsets. Many use our scenic vista for photo ops.

The dairy farmer is at the end of the line with no control over prices that they get for their milk produced. With rising input costs and the milk price forecast to continue to drop every month until the end of the year; we are being pushed beyond. We continually try to get more efficient by cutting whatever costs that we can and using labor as efficiently as possible. The State of Maine now has only 160 dairy farms and a constant decline in numbers. What will happen to all of the agricultural industries in our state grain companies, agricultural supply companies, milk haulers, fertilizer companies and equipment dealers. Which a lot of smaller businesses and land landowners depend on. Will they be able to continue in our state.

We have wonderful dedicated employees who work for minimum wage or a little above. Only because they enjoy agriculture, but when does the enjoyment for dairy stop when other businesses are paying much higher starting wages.

Dairy farmers are being forced to the point of no return with aging equipment, and building repairs that have been put off for years with the hope that things might improve. We now have to deal with supply chain issues, labor issues and huge increases in input costs such as grain, fertilizer, electricity, fuel, and labor issues.

We have also been put on a quota system with our milk cooperatives. We no longer can produce more milk to balance the budget each month. We can only produce what they say we can without paying a penalty for overproduction. So the squeeze just keeps getting tighter. I look at dairy farming as a vice and the handle keeps turning faster and faster in the wrong direction. The costs continue to rise and milk income decreases.

We would like to thank the Appropriation and Financial Affairs Committee and the Agricultural and Forestry Committee for anything they can do to help improve Maine's dairy industry.