



# WOLFE'S NECK FOR AGRICULTURE & THE ENVIRONMENT CENTER

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## **Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Director of Programs, Wolfe's Neck Center, to the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry February 7, 2024**

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Ellen Stern Griswold, and I am the Director of Programs at Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment (WNC). I am submitting this testimony on behalf WNC in support of LD 2188 – *Resolve, Regarding Legislative Review of Chapter 26: Producer Margins, a Major Substantive Rule of the Maine Milk Commission*.

WNC is a fast-growing, national nonprofit organization based on a campus of over 600 acres of coastal farmland in Freeport, Maine. Our work is dedicated to creating a world where agriculture and food systems support farmer viability, thriving ecosystems, and vibrant communities. Through regenerative farmer training, demonstration, innovative research, and collaborations, WNC works to advance agriculture – on our own campus and nationally – to accelerate holistic change in food systems and mitigate the effects of a changing climate.

In 2016, with the support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Stonyfield Organic, WNC launched its Organic Dairy Research and Training Program, which was the first of its kind in the nation. This innovative program serves as a testing ground for new management technologies and techniques, while also training the next generation of farmers in rotational grazing and regenerative and organic agricultural systems. WNC's program is part of the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, an accredited National Apprenticeship registered with the Employment and Training Administration at the U.S. Department of Labor. The program consists of 4,000 hours of training over a period of two years, with 3,712 hours focused on employment and mentoring under an approved Mentor Dairy Grazier. At its core, the program is a guided pathway to dairy grazing farming careers, which strengthens the economic and environmental wellbeing of rural communities and the dairy industry.

The success of and value provided by WNC's Organic Dairy Research and Training Program is directly tied to the economic viability of the dairy sector in Maine and beyond. In 2020, Maine Farmland Trust published its Dairy Sector Report,<sup>1</sup> which analyzes the challenges and opportunities facing the dairy sector in Maine, and identifies policy and market interventions to help stabilize the Maine dairy sector and enhance its future

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<sup>1</sup> Maine Farmland Trust, *Dairy Sector Report* (Jan. 2020), available at <https://www.maineFarmlandtrust.org/policy-research/>. Maine Farmland Trust provided a presentation about the Report to the 129<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature's Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in conjunction with Rick Kersbergen, formerly Extension Professor of Sustainable Dairy and Forage Systems at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension; Julie-Marie Bickford, formerly Executive Director of the Maine Dairy Industry Association and currently Executive Director of the Maine Milk Commission; and Annie Watson, President of the Maine Dairy Industry Association and Owner of Sheepscot Valley Farm.

viability. One of the critical policy recommendations included in the report is continued support and investment in Maine’s Dairy Stabilization Program, or the Tier Program, given its demonstrable and significant impact on Maine dairy viability.<sup>2</sup>

Dairy farms are central to Maine’s agriculture sector and rural communities, providing economic opportunities for rural businesses such as farm equipment dealers, grain and farm supply stores, and veterinarians that support the growth of other local farms. But dairy farms today are struggling with a number of challenges that impact their economic stability, including a significant rise in the cost of production, labor shortages, marketing challenges, a lack of processing infrastructure, and, for the last ten to fifteen years, significant volatility in the average price received by farmers for fluid milk.<sup>3</sup> These challenges are particularly acute for beginning dairy farmers, like the farmers who start their operations after WNC’s Organic Dairy Research and Training Program.

During these turbulent times, the Tier Program is an important safety net for dairy farmers in Maine, allowing more dairy farms to stay in business than would have otherwise been possible without the Program.<sup>4</sup> But, given that the Tier Program operates by providing a payment directly to farmers when the amount they receive from the marketplace for their milk falls below their cost of production,<sup>5</sup> the Program must be informed by the most up-to-date cost of production numbers for it to be an effective economic support tool. For all of these reasons, we strongly support the adoption of the most recent cost of production numbers from the Maine Milk Commission for the Maine Dairy Stabilization Program.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 3, 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *Annual Survey Data, Maine, Milk Price Received – Measured in \$/CWT*, <https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/results/89A542CB-DEED-3C7A-8C17-D01A50770A5A> (last visited Feb. 6, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Kersbergen et al, *Cost of Producing Milk in Maine: Results from the 2010 Dairy Cost-of-Production Study*, University of Maine, 1 (Jan. 2013), available at <https://www1.maine.gov/dacf/milkcommission/documents/b853.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Drake, *Maine’s Dairy Relief Program*, 20 Maine Policy Review 77 (2011), available at <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol20/iss1/14>.