

Dear Committee Members,

To supplement my brief remarks in today's committee hearing, I am submitting these written testimonies from two Maine farmworkers, translated from Spanish to English. These testimonies were previously provided to the Committee to Develop and Implement a Minimum Wage Bill for Agricultural Workers and helped inform that Committee's recommendations.

From Herbert:

Hello everyone, my name is Herbert and I am a dairy worker here in the state of Maine. Today I write to you about the importance and necessity of a law to guarantee a better wage for farmworkers in Maine.

To begin, it's important to understand that the immigrant community that works in Maine is a community that is giving it our all to do the best work we can on these farms. We work in the cold, sometimes in the rain; we are always working, even on holidays; we are responsible for these farms. Oftentimes we have to work 12-14 hours per day because that's what the job requires, but also because the wages are so low, you have to work that many hours in order to make enough money for you and your family.

Before you realize, you've spent years working and you're still working, doing the same job, for the same wages. Over time, our bodies wear down, we start feeling pain. And when you're no longer able to work, there's nobody to help you!

The work we do is dangerous, tiring, and it's not compensated fairly. We leave our families, we sacrifice our health and our energy. For what? To receive a wage barely enough to cover the cost of a gallon of milk? It shouldn't be like this, but the reality is that nobody is forcing the bosses to do the right thing. We can't leave it up to the good will of the bosses to pay us a better wage, because many won't do it on their own accord. If there's not a law requiring them to pay and penalizing those who don't, nothing will change.

We need laws that have enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the farms comply. If a minimum wage law is passed, you need to be sure that it will be followed. We need monitoring of the farms, people that will speak with the workers so that the law exists not just on paper but in reality.

If this law is passed, we won't have to work so many hours to support our families; we won't have to spend our whole lives in the parlor milking cows; we will be able to enjoy the fruits of our hard labor, to return to our families while we are still young.

Every year, the cost of living goes up. Every year it's more expensive to pay for school supplies for my children, food for my family, and transportation. Yet our wages remain the same. This doesn't add up; it's not fair.

Farms have enough money to be able to make these changes, to ensure that workers are receiving the minimum wage. There just needs to be a law requiring them to pay. There are small farms with few cows that are already paying more than the minimum wage. They provide good housing and good conditions. There are also large farms where the conditions and wages are terrible. Why? Why would a small farm be able to make these changes but not a large one?

This shows us that we can't leave it up to the farm owners. We have been working here for years, we cannot keep waiting. That is why I support this bill, so that workers milking cows here in Maine have the dignity we deserve.

From Rocael:

Hello my name is Rocael and I am a farmworker on a dairy farm here in the state of Maine. I want to share my testimony, or my experience, of the reality that we face as dairy workers. I want to say why it's important that we have the right to receive dignified wages.

I would like to start by saying that there are many problems in general on dairy farms, ranging from salaries to health and safety issues, but I am pleased that you are thinking about taking steps to ensure respect for our dignity and humanity.

We put our lives at risk every day working on dairies. We have to work with large animals that can kick or ram us. At any moment we could be hit and injured. We are exposed to chemicals when we prepare the cow foot baths, clean with chlorine and harsh cleaners, and more.

Beyond these risks, we labor very long hours so that you can have dairy products on your table. There are workers pulling 12-14 hour shifts. Yesterday, November 22nd, on Thanksgiving Day, I worked 18 hours.

All of these things are common across the dairy industry. It's important that you understand what we are facing.

I make these comments about the risks to our health because when something happens on the farm – if you are injured, if you have an accident, or if you fall ill – oftentimes you have to pay the medical expenses out of pocket. Because our wages are so low, sometimes we decide not to go to the doctor or to the hospital because we don't have the funds. Sometimes you won't be paid to take time off to recover. And if you spend the little amount that you are earning, then your family will suffer.

If the state ensures that we will have the right to guaranteed minimum wage, it will mean that workers won't have to choose between our health and our families' well-being.

The reason that we work so much is because we have to make enough money for our families. If we had a higher wage, a greater income, we wouldn't have to work 18 hours a day. I could work fewer hours, spend more time with my family, and still be able to support those who depend on my income. A higher wage would mean I wouldn't have to spend my whole life in this country to make a decent living.

We do the work of veterinarians, the same skilled labor as doctors who specialize in cow care. There are people who go to university to do this work, but we do it for low wages, without recognition or proper compensation for such specialized work.

As workers, we are responsible for the job we do and we do it well. Our labor should be compensated fairly because it's not easy to milk cows in the cold, when you're tired, all to receive such a low wage. Every year costs go up and life gets more expensive. We see the farm owners buy better cars and tractors for their farms. But what do we get? Do the workers get higher wages? Better protections?

That's why it would be helpful to have a law to guarantee that we receive the state minimum wage in Maine. It's necessary that this state recognize us, our humanity, and our contributions to this country. Without migrants, these farms could not exist.

I hope that this helps you to think about the needs that we have as workers in Maine. It's time for fair wages and recognition that we are part of this essential industry.

Respectful submitted,

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