

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gatine and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

I am Libby Bleakney one of four owners of Highland Farms. The farm is located in the town of Cornish on top of a hill that overlooks Mount Washington and the presidential range. We are the oldest registered Jersey herd in the nation, established in 1886. We have the fourth, fifth and sixth generations working together on the farm. Currently the seventh generation is beginning to show an interest in farming.

The farm consists of a land base of 1,200 acres of which 200 is tillable, Our milking herd is 250 cows of which 200 are milked twice day and we have about 250 head of young stock. We plant 180 acres of corn. Some is on leased land. We employ five full-time workers and five part-time employees. It is all family except on full-time employee who has worked for us for 38 years. The part-time employees work one or two days a week to give the full-time employees one day off per week.

As I have stated in the past, dairy farming is a little unique in that we are in a financial vise and it is getting harder to produce milk. We have no control over the price that we get for our milk and the import prices are continually rising so the squeeze is getting tighter and tighter.

We let our land be used for hiking, cross-country skiing, fishing, hunting, snowmobiling etc.. We hope that we can provide a little relaxing time for people to enjoy the outdoors and the views. We have a small parking area where many people come to enjoy our rural landscape watching beautiful sunrises to start their day or wonderful sunsets to end their day.

We are constantly looking for ways to get more efficient to generate more income. We have changed the way we feed and manage our milking herd which has gained us about 2 to 3 more pounds of milk per cow per day. We opened a farm store in August of 2023 selling milk, beef, cheese and maple syrup to try to supplement the farm income. It also has been a way to explain agriculture and to let people come enjoy rural, small town life.

We are grateful for all of the financial help that the state of Maine has been able to supply us with when our price for milk has been below our cost of production. You are all aware of the increases in the past few years - electricity, interest rates, grain costs, labor, health insurance, fuel, grain costs, building repairs and marketing costs to sell our milk to Agri-mark. As we look at the price forecast it does not look very promising. The average price per hundred weight that was paid to farmers in 2022 was \$24.96. In 2023 it was \$20.01 and for 2024 it was \$20.24. In 2025 it was \$19.71 and for 2026 it is projected to be \$17.78.

The dairy farmers in the state help to support other businesses in our state - equipment dealers, grain companies, milk haulers, feed stores, fertilizer and seed companies not to mention our local stores, hardware, auto parts etc..

I feel that there there are some very important items in this bond that would help dairy farming. The droughts relief program would be a great help. We are currently struggling to pay for feed for our cows because of the poor harvests that we've had due to drought conditions.

I also think the health soils program would help improve soil health and soil productivity. farmers have been short changing their soils for years because funds are low and cropping expenses are so high,

We need to make capital improve improvements to help to improve our bottom line. The low interest loans/financing would help us make much needed capital improvements so dairy farming can continue in Maine.

We at Highland Farms want to thank the state of Maine for all of the help in the past and we hope that you can continue to see your way to support dairy farming in our state. Thank you in advance for your support of LD 2094.