

2/7/24

LD 2188

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Annie Watson. I'm here today as a first-generation Maine dairy farmer testifying in support of 2188. In September of 2005, I went on a date with a dairy farmer to chop corn. I had no idea what that meant - I was a 22 year old recent college graduate, spending the summer living with my grandmother, trying to decide if I was moving to NY or LA to start my career in the theater. This farmer, -an irritatingly handsome guy, came into the restaurant where I was tending bar and managed to talk me into coming out to his farm in Lincolnville the next day to "farm with him." I agreed. Little did I know how that day would change my life.

And here we are, 19 years later, and I can say without hesitation that I wouldn't take back that day for anything. Mike sold his cows in Lincolnville shortly after we met in 2005, but in 2013, we made the decision to get back into dairy farming. Together we purchased our farm in Whitefield, from a farmer looking to exit, who wanted to keep his farm as a dairy. In the 11 years we have owned and operated Sheepscot Valley Farm, our organic dairy in Whitefield, we have seen the dairy markets change, the players in the industry change, and the landscape around us change. This change has included the decline in our dairy farm numbers from 304 down to just 145 today.

The acres in our state that were once open fields, and grazed pasture lands, are now overgrown due to lack of management. The land here in Maine is some of the oldest farm land in this country. It was this soil that grew the crops that helped feed the birth of our nation- our soil is part of the very fabric of this country. But the soil needs to be worked, and tended. According to Regenerate America, "the majority of U.S. soils are extremely degraded - topsoil loss is occurring at a rate of 4.6 tons per acre, per year on agricultural land, a major contributing factor to our climate, water, and health crisis. " Our land needs to be stewarded by farmers; and the farmers who tend upwards of 150,000 acres in all directions throughout our state are our dairy farmers.

I've been in front of this committee before talking about the continued crisis in our dairy community. We have a room full of people here today testifying about the challenges we face as dairy farmers, and how the Tier Program is a lifeline for us. All these things are true. It no longer matters what size farm you are, what market you supply, or how many generations your farm has been in existence: we are all dealing with the same challenges of rising costs that, due to inflation and actions well beyond our control, we are unable to pass on to consumers.

But what I want to express to you today is that amongst the stress and worry, the financial concern and physical demand of this job, we wake up every day and continue to milk

the cows, twice a day, for some of us three times a day, 365 days a year, because there is also hope.

Most importantly I want you to hear that despite the immense stress and worry, the financial concern and physical demands of this job - we still find hope. In spite of waking up every day - for some of us three times a day, 365 days a year and ensuring our animals are milked and cared for - we remain hopeful that there are better days ahead. We hope that next season's crops might be better. We maintain hope in the innovative techniques we are researching on our own farms, with the help of motivated service providers. We believe there are many ways we can become far more adaptable in the face of shifting weather patterns, and that we, as dairy farmers, can be an integral component of a more climate resilient Maine, that we are a part of the climate solution. But we need resources, backing, and understanding to accomplish these goals - we need your sustained support to accomplish these goals from which all of Maine's citizens will ultimately benefit.

My 8 year old just finished a project at school for which he was asked to write down his dreams for the future. One of his dreams? "That my community could have more farms." We are here today in hopes you agree.