

Dear Sirs and Madams:

This letter is written in support of the Maine Dairy Stabilization Program (the "Tier" Program).

I am a large animal veterinarian based in Exeter, providing service to farms from Albion to Fort Kent. I grew up in Central Aroostook County, live in Western Penobscot County, and have been involved in the dairy industry for 32 of my 45 years, taking care of the health of the herd as a vet for 19 of those years. Although the vast majority of my clients aren't commercial dairy farmers who ship milk, more than two thirds of my income comes from those rapidly dwindling dairy farms. As of the end of 2023, I've lost more than twice as many dairy clients as I currently have. Each one of those former farms wasn't just a client, friend, and source of income for me. They were also their own ecosystem, and an integral part of the rural Maine economy. They spent money at the feed stores, the equipment dealerships, the fuel distributors, and with the seed and fertilizer outfits. They hired local kids to throw bales, paid taxes, and served on the school boards and in town government. Unlike other Maine farms that sell a group of calves or chickens once a year, or a crop of potatoes or apples over a season, dairy farms ship product every day and get a milk check twice a month. That regular milk check flows back out into every nook and cranny of our rural state. It provides key support to the rest of the agricultural infrastructure that is utilized by the horse owners, the hobby sheep farms, and the organic kale growers. Although it may be a tough pill for them to swallow, those horse owners and sheep hobbyists only have a veterinarian because Heath Miller is milking cows with his dad in Newburgh. The same is true for most of the other parts of our agricultural infrastructure.

We're a unique state: rural, poor, and stuck up here in the corner of the country. We're fiercely independent, but with a strong tradition of feeding not just ourselves, but our neighbors to the south. In some ways, we've lost the practical implementation of that tradition over the past century, as our apple, egg, broiler, and meat industries have collapsed. We still have the remnants of those industries, and a collective memory of that strength, witnessed in derelict chicken houses, abandoned orchards, and stone walls running through mature hardwood stands. Most of what we have left is the core of our potato production, and a rapidly contracting dairy farm population. According to a 2018 NC State paper, if it wasn't for the Tier Program, we'd have lost 75% more of our dairies than we've already seen go out, and with it, the infrastructure and open space that those cows support. It's hard to say if we'd have enough infrastructure in Presque Isle to keep that core of potato growers rolling without the cows of Central Maine. Those cows are going to be gone if the State doesn't help them stick around.

It's impossible to know what the future holds for agriculture in our state. We may see most of the rest of our commercial farms go out, and be left with some small boutique ag, serving the tourists and rich folks on the coast, much like Massachusetts has done. Or, if continued resource depletion and rising energy prices continue as they have, and the vision of Ag Commissioner Amanda Beal holds true, we may see a resurgence of food production here that makes Maine the centerpiece of a vibrant New England Food System. Although we can't see what that looks like from here, we do know that we'll need open land, support, and most importantly, skilled Maine farmers who can work with that land and those animals to again feed ourselves and our neighbors. If we want that opportunity, we need to keep those skills alive by keeping the farms alive. Adopting the updated cost of production numbers will go a long way to keep those farms alive. Thank you for your consideration and support of the Maine Dairy Farmer.

Simon J. Alexander VMD