

Maine Dairy Industry Association
PO Box 5013 | 337 State Street
Augusta, ME 04430



Annie Watson, President
Dale Cole, Vice President
Jason Tessier, Secretary
Heath Miller, Treasurer
Dick Perkins, At Large

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEES OF APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS AND THE AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

“ An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of the State Government for the Fiscal Years ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025”

March 4th, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and distinguished Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee,

My name is Annie Watson. I'm here today as a first-generation Maine dairy farmer, and President of the Maine Dairy Industry Association. For the last 11 years, my husband and I have co-owned and operated Sheepscot Valley Farm, an organic dairy in Whitefield. Along with our three young children, we milk about 70 cows and manage approximately 400 acres in the surrounding area.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today to thank you for the support both committees have given to our dairy industry. Our Maine dairy farms are the backbone of our agricultural communities in more ways than one. We function as economic engines, relying on a multitude of service providers and local ag professionals. We also farm large swaths of land throughout our state-land that is some of the oldest farmland in the country. As I mentioned, our 70 cow dairy manages upwards of 400 acres, and we are considered a very small farm in the greater dairy landscape.

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. These farmers and this land both deserve to be protected. Just as farmland conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change, ensuring the farmers who are at the forefront, doing this important work are financially sustainable is of utmost importance.

The emergency payment we received last Fall was a much-needed financial infusion that didn't spend but a day in our bank account before it went back out into our local agricultural community. We are also appreciative of the funding that has been allocated to the dairy industry in the Supplemental

Budget, though it would be preferable to see that funding moved into bolstering our Dairy Stabilization Program, a program that is very much the envy of our country.

This program is a true testament of the support Maine provides for our dairy industry, an industry that can only help contribute to the State's climate goals and ultimately our self-reliance and food security.

Dairy farming is not for the faint of heart. It is labor intensive and can be both physically and emotionally exhausting. In spite of 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 have 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 from which all of Maine's citizens will ultimately benefit.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.