

Chairs Ingwersen and Pluecker, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. My name is Katie Gualtieri, and along with Haden Gooch, we make up Mayday Farm, a 40-cow organic dairy in Leeds. We would have preferred to address you in person today, but seeing as we cannot support farm labor at the moment, that was not in the cards. Nonetheless, in the daily laundry list of urgent tasks, we made it a priority to submit written testimony. This alone should highlight the necessity of the Tier Program to our ability to continue dairy farming.

Haden and I are not generational farmers. When we purchased the farm in 2021, we did so via a beginning farmer loan from the Farm Services Agency. The loan was approved based on a diversified business plan that included raising 20,000 broiler chickens a year alongside shipping milk to Stonyfield Organic. Over the last three years, milking cows alone would not have paid the bills. The property we purchased had been a conventional, 40-cow dairy for decades before the previous owners retired in the late nineties. Even through tumultuous markets, the farm was able to support two families by shipping milk to Oakhurst. In the years since we started considering buying the property, several small family dairies have sold out in Leeds alone. When we started shipping milk to Stonyfield Organic, we were the anomaly of a new dairy in the sea of farms selling out.

The market landscape has changed. More than ever, geopolitical forces and economies of scale are impacting small and mid-sized dairies. The war in Ukraine, grain embargos, loss of export markets, and the continued post-COVID inflation wave have meant milk pay prices have not kept pace with the basic cost of production. While the ebb and flow of this is different for organic and conventional dairies, the overall impact is the same. I am sure the results of the latest cost of production study have demonstrated this more clearly than I can.

As Stonyfield producers, we interact regularly with other northeast dairy farmers from outside Maine who don't have the safety net the Tier Program provides. For organic dairies in Vermont, the result has been dire. The existence and support of the Tier Program from the state legislature indicates that Maine seems to understand the crucial role of dairy. We have all heard the statistics around the amount of economic activity one dairy farm stimulates. Our small farm alone supports a whole host of local and small businesses from mechanics to veterinary services to seed suppliers. In an Amazon dominated world, we still keep the majority of our dollars within the state.

A vote in favor of increasing the initial price of Tier Program payments numbers in line with the most recent cost of production study will send a clear message of commitment to and understanding of the importance of dairy farms to the overall agricultural landscape and strength of the state economy. Thank you for your time.

