

Testimony of Isabel Mullin in support of
**LD 2188, Resolve, Regarding Legislative Review of Chapter 26:
Producer Margins, a Major Substantive Rule of the Maine Milk
Commission**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
February 7, 2024*

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and Esteemed Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

My name is Isabel Mullin, and I am a Maine dairy farmer. Prior to working for my family's farm, I spent a few years proudly serving as legislative staff in the Senate Majority Office.

Rustlewood Farm was started by my grandparents in 1947. Once one of several dairy farms in Kittery, today it is one of just a handful of commercial dairy farms left in York County. The farm sits just a couple miles up the road from U.S. Route 1 and the Kittery Trading Post. The farm is a member/owner of Agri-Mark, a northeast dairy farmer cooperative that produces Cabot and McCadam cheeses and other dairy products. The farm milks between 70 and 85 registered Holsteins and farms roughly 300 acres up and down Route 101 in Kittery and Eliot. The owned land is conserved by a conservation easement held by the Kittery Land Trust, and my uncle who owns it today grants permission to the public to hunt the property as well. In the suburban town and tourist destination, our farm is an important connection the area and state's agricultural heritage.

Today, I'm testifying in strong support of LD 218 and the proposed increases to the tier target prices. I will not pretend to be an expert in milk prices, Julie Marie-Bickford and others can better speak to the nuances of the FMMO and Maine milk prices, but what I can speak to is the constantly increasing costs of producing milk and the fact that Maine's dairy industry will not exist without the support of the Dairy Stabilization Program.

In Maine the cost of labor, energy, and hauling is among the highest in the nation. In order to produce fresh, nutritious, local milk, most Maine dairy farmers have diversified their operations to include more profitable ventures to subsidize their love of milking cows, but should the cost of producing milk continue to exceed the

milk check the only way Maine's heritage dairy industry will survive—especially the smaller farms—is through the support of the Tier Program.

Our industry already sits precariously teetering on the edge of downward spiral. Maine now only has around 150 dairy farms left after losing a quarter of our farms over the last few years, if we lose many more the broader industry that supports these farmers—processors, haulers, suppliers, maintenance, testers, etc.—could be in jeopardy as well. If the dominos start to fall, there's no saying where that might leave us. As with most things, we lose economies of scale as our farm numbers shrink. While I certainly don't want to be alarmist, and as an aspiring farm owner I have to remain optimistic about the future, *I cannot underscore enough the importance of the Dairy Stabilization Fund for the preservation of Maine's dairy farms.*

Over the past two years I've had the opportunity to serve on the National Milk Producers Federation Young Cooperators Advisory Council representing Agri-Mark. In that capacity I have met and gotten to know young farmers from across the country—from Oregon and California to Ohio and Virginia to our neighbors in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire and almost everywhere in between. A common concern amongst these young farmers has been the slumping milk prices and skyrocketing costs of inputs in 2023 and now continuing into 2024. I heard from a fellow dairy farmer in Minnesota last week about the exodus of dairy farms in their state, including more than 50 in November of 2023 alone. In fact, their state lost more farms last the year than we have in Maine. Preserving the Tier program is key to ensuring Maine has a future with dairy farms and is able to provide our residents with milk and dairy products.

Maine's dairy industry may not be as well-known or iconic as our lobster, potato, or blueberry ones—perhaps it's because we are too busy milking cows to effectively tell our story—but its history is just as deep, and its product arguably more vital to our food independence. And while I wish farmers were consistently paid a price that meets or exceeds the cost to produce milk in Maine, the reality is that is not always the case and our industry is in jeopardy without the support of the Tier program. I know from conversations with my uncle and aunt our farm would not be in business today without the support it's received from the Tier program.

Thus, I urge you to support the proposed major substantive rules provisionally adopted by the Maine Milk Commission.