

Vilsack Says Dairy Industry Must Come Together

AP Wire Service

By Lisa Rathke, Associated Press Writer

BURLINGTON, VT (AP) – U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told struggling dairy farmers Feb. 13 that the USDA is committed to making milk prices more stable and helping to create regional food systems linking farmers with local consumers.

At a town hall meeting attended by Vermont's congressional delegation, Vilsack said the peaks and valleys of the dairy industry have become "very severe and very frequent" and that farmers are suffering across the country. Temporary fixes, such as price supports, are not enough, he said.

"I think it's fair to say that the time has come for the industry to come together," he said. "For folks in Vermont and Wisconsin and California and Mexico and all parts of the United States who are interested and engaged in dairy

to come together and figure out a consensus approach so that we can begin to create greater stability and greater sustainability in the dairy industry."

Farmers, who last year endured the lowest milk prices in 40 years, urged Vilsack to act now, or risk losing more farms. The average farmer has lost \$100,000 and 50 Vermont dairy farms have gone out of business in the last year, said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-VT, who asked Vilsack to visit.

New Hampshire has lost more than 350 dairy farms in the last five years. In Maine, dramatic losses have leveled off thanks to a state program set up after hundreds of dairy farms went out of business. By the end of last year, there were about 340 dairy farms in Maine, down from around 900 in the mid-1990s.

"Action is needed immediately; it cannot wait until the 2012 farm bill," said Middlebury farmer Bob Farm-

er, representing a host of farmer groups.

"Something's gotta be done to put some money in the milk checks for the Northeast and the rest of the nation," said Ken Dibbell of South New Berlin, N.Y.

Some farmers called for supply management of milk to ensure stable, fair prices.

"We need to do something and the only way we can do it is through supply management," said Roger Rainville, of Alburg.

If there is consensus for it across the country, Vilsack said he would be all for it. He said he hoped the National Dairy Council would meet soon to discuss the milk pricing system and to tell the USDA and Congress what changes are needed to make prices more stable and predictable.

"And I'm here to tell you today that we are absolutely committed to trying to figure out to create that kind of system," he said. ☞



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