

National Family Farm Coalition: Farmers and allies urge immediate government action to end dairy crisis

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Diverse Coalition Demands Steps to Raise Farmer Prices, Prevent Farmer Suicides

Today more than 50 family farmer, labor, and consumer organizations urged federal agriculture policymakers to take immediate steps to help US dairy farmers, who have struggled for years with milk prices that are well below their costs of production. In a letter sent to House and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairs and Ranking Members and USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue, the groups detailed several actions including: a milk floor price set at \$20 per hundred pounds (cwt); establishment of a program to purchase excess milk for food banks; a moratorium on federal funds granted to industrial livestock operations (“factory farms”); federal hearings on the milk pricing structure; and implementation of a dairy supply management program to stabilize prices.

“The nation’s dairy farmers are again in dire straits, just like we were in the 1980s,” said Jim Goodman, Wisconsin dairy farmer and board president of National Family Farm Coalition. “Proposed safety nets are totally inadequate and without real long-term market reform, dairy farmers will continue to lose their farms. Consumers who care where their milk comes from and policymakers claiming to care about rural America must support these steps to ensure farmers a fair price. Without immediate government action, the days of the small dairy farm are numbered.”

Milk prices for dairy farmers currently average \$15/cwt, well below the cost of production of more than \$22/cwt, and USDA forecasts a 19 percent drop in dairy farm net cash income this year. In recent months, dairy marketing cooperatives have provided suicide hotline information to members along with their milk checks. In March, Dean Foods sent letters to more than 100 dairy farmers in eight states terminating their milk contracts at the end of May, leaving them, in an increasingly

restricted market, with no confirmed buyer for their milk. The letter asserts that proposed recent changes to the Margin Protection Program, the current so-called “safety net,” and the dairy provisions proposed in the House farm bill will do little to change the situation for most dairy farmers.

The actions outlined in NFFC’s letter, particularly the \$20 floor price, would provide immediate relief for farmers in debt and unable to pay bills. Legislation recently introduced by New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand would provide much-needed emergency relief of a guaranteed milk price, but with costs covered by taxpayers rather than by milk processors.

“Dairy farmers today are facing no money, no hope, no way to plant spring crops or pay last year’s debts,” says Pennsylvania dairy farmer Brenda Cochran, a member of Progressive Agriculture Organization (ProAg). “Nothing will stop the financial hemorrhage we are facing except a better farm milk price. To keep farmers on the land, fresh food in our grocery carts, and save rural America, we need a \$20/cwt floor price and a supply management program as outlined in the proposed 2011 Federal Milk Marketing Improvement Act.” ProAg helped to draft the 2011 legislation.

Two of the letter’s other proposals – a program for government purchase of excess milk for emergency food providers and a moratorium on federal funds going to factory farms – would curb the current oversupply of milk, a major contributor to low prices. In seeking a long-term solution, the letter urges Congress to schedule hearings in the next nine months to develop new approaches to dairy policy in partnership with family dairy farmers rather than under the sole influence of processors, manufacturers, and corporate-style dairy cooperatives. The final recommendation to implement a supply management program would ensure dairy farmers are permanently protected from price drops due to oversupply, allowing them to provide fair wages to their workers and support their local economies.

“When farmers aren’t making a living wage from their product, they must cut costs – very often at the expense of their workers,” said Greg Asbed of the Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers, one of the letter’s signers. “We need a just dairy pricing system so that both farmers and workers can be paid equitably for their work.”

To read the letter and list of signing organizations, please go to <http://nffc.net/index.php/2018dairycrisis/>