

Kara O'Connor: Why farmers are dumping milk - and how consumers can help

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Wisconsin Farmers Union has received a number of inquiries from concerned consumers along the lines of, “Can’t farmers do something with the milk other than dump it? Why are farmers disposing of milk when I’m being limited on milk purchases at the store?”

This situation is indeed troubling. It is heartbreaking for farmers to have to dispose of their milk like this.

The reason this is happening right now is that many of the largest institutional buyers of dairy products, including schools and restaurants, abruptly closed nationwide — and they, in turn, abruptly cancelled orders that they had placed with cheese plants and milk bottlers. Since most dairy products are perishable, dairy processors can only store a limited amount of product that they don’t have a buyer for. Once their storage is full, they start turning away farmers’ milk from the plant because they have nowhere to put the finished product.

Farmers Union and other advocacy groups have urged the USDA to step in and buy surplus dairy products for distribution to food pantries, etc. We are hopeful that this will happen soon, and begin to relieve the current kink in the dairy supply chain.

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The other thing that will hopefully happen, but this will take a bit more time, is for dairy products that were originally destined for restaurants to be re-packaged for

retail sale. People are buying less food at restaurants right now, but they are buying more food at grocery stores. Unfortunately, it will take some time for food processors to make that conversion. A cheese plant that normally produces unbranded 50-pound bags of mozzarella cheese for restaurants cannot instantaneously convert its production line to make branded 16-ounce packages of cheese for grocery stores. Hopefully business owners will get creative and start coming up with new ways to meet consumer demand for dairy products outside of the restaurant supply chain.

There is one other important action that Congress could take. For many years, WFU has urged Congress to create a mechanism that would give farmers the economic incentive to balance their milk production with market demand, so that farmers never find themselves in the terrible situation of having to dispose of milk that doesn't have a home. This current circumstance really drives home the need for balancing dairy supply and demand. While nothing could have entirely insulated the dairy industry from the impact of the global pandemic, farmers would be far better off in this moment if we had a program in place to help them quickly adjust their production in response to market conditions.

As a farm organization, we really appreciate consumers' concern for farmers. If the grocery store where you usually shop is still limiting customers to only 1 or 2 gallons of milk, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection suggests that you ask the store manager to consider lifting that limitation. It appears the initial flurry of stockpile-buying has tapered off, and many stores can now keep the dairy case stocked even without limiting purchases. So please do continue supporting dairy farmers by buying their products. But let's also work together for greater structural change that ensures we keep family farms on the land. Thank you, and stay well.

— *O'Connor is government relations director for Wisconsin Farmers Union.*