

Dairy farms

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disappearing fast. Within the last 25 years more than 625 farms have closed, leaving Massachusetts with only 189 dairy farms.

"These are the best of the dairy farmers because they have survived this long," State Sen. Stephen Brewer said.

The only other dairy farm in the area is on Dean Hill Road in Westminster.

Brewer has proposed three bills to the Legislature this session to try to help dairy farms stay in business. One hundred sixty two farmers signed petitions supporting these bills, including the Rossbachs.

"They would certainly help us," Charlie said. "They would keep us afloat."

Rossbachs said it costs about \$16 to produce 100 pounds of milk, and they sell it for \$16. This means the family is just squeaking by financially.

"We had a profit other years and we've dug into our savings," Philip said. "After this year we'll have no more savings."

The prices of materials such as tractor parts, milking equipment and their own costs of living have also increased.

There are about 12 gallons of milk per 100 pound and the Rossbachs make 2 cents per gallon of milk.

"The milk man makes all the money," Philip said.

The Rossbach farm produces about 9,000 pounds of milk a day with the average cow producing seven pounds.

The Rossbachs go through 108 pounds a feed a day. They grow their own hay and corn but can't put the time or the space into growing grain.

"It doesn't pay for the price of grain," Philip said.

Charlie explained that the price of grain has skyrocketed now that grain is being used to make ethanol fuel.

Brewer's bill would try to help farmers receive more of the cost of that gallon of milk. It would create a scale between the retail price of milk and the cost of producing that milk on the farm.

The bill would set the retail price at no more than 200 percent of what the dairy farmer is getting for that same amount of milk, Warren

Facey, the executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers said.

"If they raise the price they have to give us an equal amount," he said.

"In 1980, we were getting 52 percent of the consumer dollar and in 2006 we were getting 27 percent of the consumer dollar," he said. "That's why (milk companies) don't want anyone messing with the price of milk."

The federal government sets a minimum amount that the farmer must receive but it is no longer high enough, say the farmers.

In the 1950s the Rossbachs ran their own milk processing plant as well and would deliver the milk to their customers. But that aspect of the business got too time-consuming and expensive as more and more regulations came into place about how to pasteurize milk.

"We now wholesale to the larger firms," Charlie said.

They now work mostly with Garelick Farms.

In order to compete in the marketplace the family has had to increase the size of their farm, but that comes with a price as well.

"We have to work harder and longer to make it work," Charlie said.

The Rossbachs own 250 acres, using 75 acres for farming and 60 acres for grazing. To make additional money, they rent 150 acres to others.

One of Brewer's bills would help dairy farmers protect their land by offering financial incentives to keep it agricultural.

The bill would establish a department within the Department of Agricultural Resources — the Open Space Preservation Fund. The purpose of the fund would be to compensate existing dairy farmers for providing the public benefit of (a) preserving open space from development pressure; (b) providing working landscapes in the Commonwealth; (c) fostering agro-tourism; and (d) preserving agrarian traditions and rural culture.

"When you protect land you leave something that will last longer than a generation," Brewer said.

The state and the people Northern Worcester and Middlesex Counties have taken great steps to protect their small town vistas.

"We have precedent that it is important," Brewer said. "If you lose these farms, all of the work that these land trusts have put in would be for naught."



The Rossbach's have 150 milking cows on their Townsend farm.

Brewer said the vistas that preserved by maintaining farmlands are extensive and a major draw for tourists.

The third bill Brewer proposed would establish a retail milk dealer fee. This would allow the Department of Revenue to impose a fee on the handling of milk sold at retail to consumers.

This would help farmers in directly by allowing the state to pay these fees to the farmers, said Facey.

Facey said the proposed bill is similar to a law passed in the 1990s but that law was deemed illegal because the money didn't go into the state general fund but into a specific state account.

"This one, the money goes into the general fund," Facey said. "We take the chance of losing it."

"The price of milk isn't out of range when looking at other liquids," Charlie said.

He compared the cost of milk at about \$3 a gallon to the cost of orange juice at over \$4.

Brewer said this is the time for the government to get involved and help. The states of Maine, Vermont and Connecticut have already passed similar laws.

Brewer said the three bills he has proposed will help both with the long-term and the short-term sustainability of the farms. The cost of \$3 million to \$12 million will directly benefit farmers, he noted.

"Politically it is not a win or a lose situation," said Brewer, who grew up on his great-uncle's dairy farm in Barre. "There just aren't enough dairy farmers that will make an election impact. This is visceral, from the heart."

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A day on the dairy farm

A cow can start producing milk at two years old and can produce for many years. During the winter there are usually about 140 cows that are producing milk but in the spring and the fall the Rossbachs on Dew-More Farm only have 110 to 115 cows that are milking.

"We have field work to do, so we can't milk as many cows," Philip said. It takes the farmers about four hours to milk the 140 cows in their one-room milking room. Gone are the days when a farmer would sit and milk every cow himself, now the family has 10 stalls where the cows are milked using a machine.

Charlie said they clean the cows' utters with iodine before and after they are milked. A person has to put the manifold on the cows, which will automatically release when a cow is dry. The cows are milked twice a day — from 5 to 9 a.m. and then from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m.

During the rest of the day, the three brothers are doing chores around the barn and farm, caring for the cows, and tending to the hay and corn.

"You fall asleep eating supper sometimes," Philip said.

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