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Sarah Gardner: Buying local at mini-mart supports local dairy farms

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By Sarah Gardner

GREAT BARRINGTON — It's fun to buy veggies at the farm market: we pay the farmer directly and we know our money is supporting a local farm. Why don't we get this same warm feeling buying a gallon of milk at the supermarket? It's not just because the self-checkout machine doesn't smile at us or have dirt under its nails.

June is Dairy Month and time to remember that milk is the Berkshires' primary local food product, despite the fact that the dairy farmers aren't greeting us at the farmers' market. Massachusetts lawmakers are working on legislation to help save the state's remaining 147 dairy farms.

It's understandable that most consumers don't think of milk as a local product. Thirteen of the 17 Berkshire County dairy farms are members of dairy cooperatives that collect and market their milk. It goes to Western Massachusetts dairy processors and returns to the Berkshires as Hood, Garelick and store brand milk, Hood and Friendlies ice cream, and Cabot butter.

Massachusetts is more self-sufficient for milk and dairy than any other food product: about 20 percent of the milk consumed in Massachusetts is produced here and most of the milk consumed is produced in the Northeast. Overall, the state ships in about 90 percent of its food is from out of state.

Berkshire County has lost nine dairy farms in the past 10 years, according to Debra Senger of the USDA Farm Services Agency. Of the remaining dairies, 13 sell milk through Agri-Mark Cabot or Dairy Farmers of America (DFA). County milk sales hover around \$10 million a year, surpassing any other locally grown product by several million dollars.

Dairy farms are considered "anchor tenants on the land" because they manage a vast majority of the county's 61,000 acres of farmland, half of which is in pasture or crops. Their importance to supporting the agricultural economy, land base, local food supply, and rural landscape is well-documented.

"Dairy farms have a multiplier effect on the local economy that goes beyond milk production," says Bob Wellington, Agri-Mark economist. "A dairy cow cow generates about \$13,000 in economic activity each year." Recognizing their importance, the Commonwealth has played a critical role in preserving dairy farms.

Documentary Monday night

In 2008 Massachusetts set out to save its dairy industry with the passage of the Dairy Farm Preservation Act. It has done a good job stemming farm losses: during the past two years of low milk prices, drought, and declining milk consumption, New England lost record numbers of farms: New Hampshire:19, Vermont: 20, Connecticut: 5, and Massachusetts: 3.

The Commonwealth retained most of its farms in large part due to the Dairy Farm Tax Credit, which provides some remedy to the volatile federal milk pricing system in which farmers' milk check is frequently less than their production cost. "The goal of the tax credit is to bridge the gap between the cost of production and the milk price farmers receive," according to Catherine de Ronde, dairy economist. "The Tax Credit has helped most of the farms in Massachusetts, including ours," says Jim Larkin of Sheffield. But while it's helped, "it doesn't come close to fully bridging the gap," says de Ronde. The tax credit was triggered every month of 2016, because production costs consistently exceeded the federal milk price.

Massachusetts is poised to offer more help to dairy farms squeezed by the federal pricing system. House Bill 2616, An Act Relative to the Dairy Farm Tax Credit, sponsored by Representative Kulik of Worthington, would double the fund from \$4 to \$8 million. "The milk pricing system is unfair" says Rep. Kulik, and "Without a fair price, we will end up with only huge, concentrated dairy farms in this country. An extra \$4 million is a pittance in terms of the entire state budget but it means so much to our farmers." The bill failed last year. "Even doubled, the tax credit would not fully bridge the gap," says de Ronde, but farmers tell me all the time, "We wouldn't be in business anymore without the Dairy Tax Credit."

On June 27 the Joint Revenue Committee will hold a hearing on House Bill 2616 and letters or emails of support to Chairs Representative Jay Kaufman and Senator Michael Brady, would help gain the committee's support for the bill.

Sarah Gardner is the producer of "Forgotten Farms," a documentary film about New England's dairy farms will screen at The Triplex in Great Barrington Monday, June 19, at 7 p.m. A talk-back with the filmmakers and a panel discussion with dairy farmer Jim Larkin and Berkshire Grown Executive Director Barbara Zheutlin, will follow the screening, which is hosted by Berkshire Grown. Tickets are \$10 at the door and may be reserved by calling Berkshire Grown at 413-528-0041, <https://berkshiregrown.org/forgotten-farms-screening/>

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