

## 'Forgotten Farms' Looks Into Plight of Struggling Dairies

**Paul Post**

*New York Correspondent*

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — A cultural divide separates conventional dairy farmers from the new and beginning farmers spawned by the local food movement.

That's the key theme of the film "Forgotten Farms," which examines the plight of struggling dairies that are becoming increasingly scarce in the Northeast.

The documentary was presented Sept. 29 at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, followed by a discussion with three local farmers led by film director Dave Simonds and producer Sarah Gardner, who teaches land-use planning at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Simonds said the inspiration for the film came from students who were asked to interview farmers for a school project but never visited any dairies.

"The kids said, 'we had no idea they were there,'" Simonds said. "That's the cornerstone of why we made the film."

New England has lost more than 10,000 dairies in the past 50 years. Of the 2,000 left, about half are small family farms in Vermont. Similar trends have occurred

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throughout the industry, including upstate New York.

"We're invisible," said Chris Koval, co-owner of Koval Brothers Farm in Schuylerville. "A lot of times it feels like we're in the way."

His farm is one of about 30 in Saratoga, Washington and Rensselaer counties whose milk goes to Stewart's Shops, a convenience store chain with more than 330 locations. Only a couple of decades ago, Stewart's had a network of more than 50 local dairies.

Once the backbone of rural communities, farms now comprise less than 1 percent of the U.S. population. Dairies in particular are faced with strict environmental regulations, fast-growing development pressures and the financial strain of rising costs in the face of low milk prices.

As demand for fresh, healthy food increases among urban dwellers, centuries-old dairy farms are sometimes overlooked, or looked down upon, as important contributors to regional food systems and efforts to preserve dwindling farmland.

Philosophical differences center around things such as the use of chemicals versus organic production, non-GMO versus genetically altered crops, and the way animals are kept and cared for.

Charles Hanehan of Hanehan Family Dairy in Saratoga said that the insect-resistant alfalfa he grows, a product of

farms have 1,600 cows, said well-run dairies can provide a good future for today's young people. All four of his adult children, three sons and a daughter, are involved in the operation.

"If you're well-managed and have size and scale, you can put money aside to get you through the down years," he said. "In our area we have some really good farms."

"I couldn't ask for a better place to raise a family," he added. "I kind of feel sorry for people who have to raise kids in a suburban situation. It's a lot tougher to keep them on the straight and narrow."

Pandora Davis, a veterinarian whose husband, Jan, co-owns Kings Brothers Dairy in Northumberland, said she's uncertain of the industry's future.

"Every dairy farmer lives in fear that their milk market might be shut off," she said. "Quite honestly, I don't know if I want my kids to do it."

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genetic research and engineering, reduces the need for pesticides.

Most of the 15 farms interviewed for the film, all in New England, said they're barely making a profit but stay in it because they simply love what they do. As one farmer said, many people retire so they can do what they've always wanted to. "I guess I've been retired my whole life," he said, smiling.

Another young dairyman, from a 13-generation farm, said he didn't want to be the one responsible for letting the longtime family business go under.

But Hanehan, whose two



**Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs hosted a recent showing of the award-winning documentary film "Forgotten Farms," followed by a panel discussion. From left are Sarah Gardner, Dave Simonds, Pandora Davis, and Saratoga County dairy farmers Chris Koval and Charles Hanehan.**

**Photo by Paul Post**