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Testimony before the House Agriculture and Forest Committee  
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H.426 Expansion of raw milk sales

Madam Chair and Hon members of the Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify.

Provisions International, Ltd. is a specialty food distributor based in White River Junction. We have been in business in Vermont since 1986 and have a regional customer base of over 500 retail stores, food co-ops and restaurants in 5 New England states and New York. We currently employ 30 people. While we carry a wide range of products, we have built our reputation on our offerings of cheese. Since 2004, Provisions International has added over 175 Vermont cheese varieties to our inventory. In 2014, the sale of Vermont cheese represented 43% of our total gross sales. This translates into over 350,000 pounds of Vermont cheese sold last year. In addition our trucks haul over 2,000,000 pounds of Vermont cheese every year to be shipped across the country and internationally.

Not only has the amount and variety of cheese made in Vermont increased but the quality of that cheese has consistently improved over the years. Cheese made in Vermont enjoys an extremely positive reputation in our region and throughout the country. Consumers, chefs and retailers trust that cheese made in Vermont is delicious and safe. Vermont cheese consistently wins top awards in national and international competitions.

Provisions is in the unique position of having witnessed first hand the growth of this industry in Vermont. We have seen small production cheese and butter makers who began with just a few animals grow into viable businesses whose products can be found in the best restaurants and retailers in the country. We have seen these small farmers able to comply with health and safety regulations; greatly helped by an accommodating and understanding Vermont Department of Agriculture. Not only have they complied but also more importantly they have grown to understand why regulation of value added dairy products is so important.

We believe that House Bill 426 would create a subset of unlicensed unregulated dairy product producers in Vermont that has the potential to completely undermine the progress that has been made in building both the reputation and quality of the Vermont brand. The very act of lowering the standards in the making of any dairy product, however small its production, will in our eyes decrease the value of Vermont cheese as a whole. We here in Vermont should be concerned with making

value added dairy products such as cheese, yogurt, kefir and butter, better and safer, with increasing quality, and not the opposite. If the cheese from one Vermont cheesemaker were to make someone seriously ill, the implications could be devastating for our vibrant and growing industry. And those implications would affect not just the farmers themselves, but could impact businesses such as ours, our employees and our customers who rely upon the standards that Vermont cheesemakers have established over the last 15 years.

Relaxed regulation exposes Vermont to increased scrutiny. The FDA is not only very active in Vermont, they are intensely focused on raw milk products both imported and domestically produced. Provisions had a recent visit from the FDA. In June of last year, an FDA inspector visited our facility and when I asked to what we owed the pleasure of her visit, she indicated she heard we sold Vermont-made raw milk cheese and was there to collect samples.

Regulation of cheesemaking is a public health and safety issue, much the same as the regulation of driving cars on Vermont roads. Vermont requires that all drivers are licensed, and that the cars they drive are insured, registered and inspected even if they only drive on dirt roads and on Sundays. We believe that the health and safety standards that Vermont cheesemakers must meet should be fairly applied across the board to anyone who makes value added dairy products, regardless of farm size or amount of value added product produced.

Please understand that we are not debating the sale or usage of raw milk in value added dairy products such as cheese, cream, butter, yogurt and kefir. We happen to be fans of raw milk and these products. The point we fell compelled to make is that the sale or usage of raw milk in dairy products sold to the public, no matter the scale or production or sale, demands responsibility. It would be completely irresponsible to relax or do away with all together regulations and practices that would prevent the safe consumption of raw milk and raw milk dairy products. Doing so puts the sale of all Vermont dairy products, raw or not, at risk. It jeopardizes the entire industry of hard working Vermont farmers, cheesemakers, distributors, retailers and chefs. We urge you to please act responsibly.

The success of our business depends upon the continuing consistency and excellent reputation of Vermont products. We believe House Bill 426 could have a detrimental impact on our company and the Vermont Dairy industry as a whole. We oppose House Bill 426. Thank you.