

CONVENTIONAL FARMING PRECLUDES CLEAN LAKE

Editor's note: This commentary is by James H. Maroney Jr., who has a master's degree in Environmental Law & Policy from Vermont Law School, a master's degree in business administration and is a former organic dairy farmer.

A letter to Laura DiPietro, deputy director of agricultural resource management for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets.

I am very glad I attended yesterday's Extension meeting, in which you and your colleagues presented to Middlebury area farmers what the agency expects them to do in order to comply with the RAPs [required agricultural practices]. But you gave those in attendance the impression that the agency does not expect their actions to have any effect on the problem. The agency only expects them to show good intentions.

I do not mean to impugn you as

a person, Laura, but I do impugn the agency's dedication to the task, which is not to salvage the protocols of the conventional dairy industry but to clean up the lake. Neither am I insensitive to the enormity of the challenge Vermont's conventional dairy farmers face in reducing their industry's contribution to water pollution. But good intentions are not going to clean up the lake. The adjustments to the prevailing business model you described yesterday might reduce the problem slightly, but they cannot possibly get anywhere near the 35 percent reduction target the TMDL indicates is required. In fact, any row crop farming in "frequently" flooded fields is going to frustrate all Vermont's efforts to attain improvements in water quality and certainly an agency willing to grant exemptions from regulations to those who experience difficult or impossible circumstances when row

cropping in "frequently" flooded fields is not going to either.

The farmers in the room yesterday were exhibiting a pretty constructive attitude. But you were pandering to them. You did not ask them if, under present circumstances — the gathering effects of global warming, steadily rising lake pollution, steadily rising milk surplus, desperately low milk prices and increasingly stringent state regulations, all of which they see — they thought it necessary to farm in the floodplain at all. Patently, the only reason for planting corn is to induce cows to make extra milk. But seed, fertilizer and diesel fuel, labor, planting, harvesting, and storing corn costs money, and the value of the extra milk feeding it admittedly produces must exceed its cost. And yet, as every Vermont dairy farmer knows all too well, the FMMO [Federal Milk Marketing Orders] markets are awash in surplus milk,

which is why their paychecks are so low. The combination of these circumstances poses an existential threat to conventional Vermont dairy farmers and predictions are that these same circumstances are going to obtain for the foreseeable future. How does your suggestion to farmers that a few adjustments to their protocols will attain a clean lake and permit them to continue to push for maximum corn and milk yields, make any sense to anybody? We don't, in a word, need the milk: why must our farmers pollute the lake farming as if we did?

I fully realize that were you to require the farmers to achieve the goals of the RAPs instead of making an effort to comply with them would be a huge adjustment for them. The new RAPs have the potential to dramatically change not just the way they operate but their cost schedules and revenue streams. Perhaps it is time for the agency to have this

discussion with the dairy farmers instead of deceiving them?

The state's multi-faceted legislative body has finally come but reluctantly to the conclusion that the economics of clean water are compelling. But the Legislature, which, in 1993, inexplicably gave responsibility for attaining its water quality standards to the Agency of Agriculture, has yet to acknowledge that Vermont cannot attain the goal while encouraging conventional farming. What was missing from your explanation to the farmers yesterday, and from your agency's clean water policy in general, is a hard phosphorus reduction target and a date certain when Vermont agriculture must meet that target. Without your agency's conviction that these goals must be determined and met, Vermont will continue to have both a polluted lake and an economically enfeebled dairy industry.