

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.750

An Act to Provide Financial Support for Animal-Welfare-Certified Farmers in Vermont

House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

February 20, 2018- 1:15 PM

Good afternoon Representative Partridge and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. My name is Bob Fireovid and I raise 100% grass-fed, Animal Welfare Approved beef on Health Hero Farm in South Hero, Vermont. I'm here today to speak in support of H.750, which would help farmers throughout the state improve the welfare of their animals, as well as the viability and management of their farms.

Health Hero Farm is a complete cow-calf operation and our pastures are USDA-certified organic. In September, 2017, Health Hero Farm became a certified Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) beef operation. Although our practices met most of the AWA-certification requirements during the grazing season, changes in management, infrastructure and equipment were required to bring our overwinter operations into compliance with AWA standards.

We were motivated to take these steps to become AWA-certified because we experienced first-hand the negative impacts of poor overwinter practices on our cattle and on ourselves. Prior to 2017, we had issues with the condition of our cows and with calf health; and we ourselves endured discouraging working conditions. The Animal Welfare Approved standards and audit process taught us better practices for beef farming humanely – specifically how to treat our animals, and ourselves.

Although AWA has high standards for certification, the program deals cooperatively with farmers, offering technical assistance and guidance. Despite already aligning with most of the AWA standards, the changes Health Hero Farm did need to make in order to achieve AWA-certification were relatively expensive; and we couldn't find any grant programs in Vermont to help farmers with equipment and infrastructure changes for improving animal welfare. In order to make those on-farm improvements, we did some research and found out about a national nonprofit organization, the Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT), which provides grants to help farmers make welfare and pasture-improvements on their farms. The program is quite competitive and only has a \$50,000 budget for the whole country, but we applied for a grant and ultimately received an award of \$2,500, which allowed us to build a mobile animal health station for our cattle. The station provides the animals with important mineral supplements, has a number of scratchers to make-up for the lack of trees on our pastures, and brackets for hanging dust bags to coat the animals with fly repellent. After installing the grant-funded animal health station, we saw significant fly reduction and improved health of our herd and, of course, were able to pass the AWA certification audit.

We at Health Hero Farm believe that most Vermont citizens consider humane treatment of livestock for food to be an ethical imperative and that, ideally, all livestock farmers should be certified for humane treatment. We should be encouraging farmers in the state to strive for welfare certification, which is why H.750 is so important. Beyond all of the economic benefits that can come from certification, we've found that participating in an animal welfare certification has made us better farmers, more skilled at caring for our animals and managing our farm. H.750 would help remove some of the financial barriers farmers face when adopting certification, which most often take the form of necessary infrastructure changes.

If H.750 were enacted, Vermont will be the only state to actively encourage animal-welfare practices on its farms. We believe that this distinction will enhance the “Vermont” brand and provide Vermont livestock farmers with a strong competitive advantage in large metropolitan markets throughout the Northeast.

Health Hero Farm is very proud to be Animal Welfare Approved and we want more farmers in Vermont to be able to experience the benefits of welfare certification; for their animals, their business and their own peace of mind.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We hope that this Committee will support H.750 and help more Vermont farmers achieve welfare certification for their farms.

Sincerely,

Robert Fireovid
Health Hero Farm

