

Dairy in Vermont
Statehouse Discussion
January 27th, 2017

Good morning, I am Bill Rowell, a Franklin county dairy farmer, my brother Brian and I operate Green Mountain Dairy Farm in the town of Sheldon. Our herd consists of 900 lactating cows, 150 dry cows, and 500 or so heifers and calves.

In 1999 we built three state of the art barns to house the milking herd, a dry cow barn in 2003, a digester project came along in 2006, a heifer barn in 2008, and a new calf barn in 2013.

Our cows are milked three times a day and produce award winning milk, year after year, for the St. Albans Dairy Co operative. In addition to management, the farm has 18 full time employees on payroll.

Green Mountain Dairy was Vermont's Dairy Farm of The Year for 2008. Since then we have hosted tours for more than 25,000 people from 31 countries. Last August we hosted an event sponsored by The Vt. Agency of Agriculture and University Extension Service, 1,200 people came to participate in Vermont Breakfast on The Farm. After enjoying a sausage and pancake breakfast the tour began, 100 volunteers were on hand to engage the audience, explain what they were seeing, and answer questions.

Today, most consumers are detached from agriculture, they want to know where their food comes from, observe the routine practices to see how it's produced, they want to know about animal care, see the animals, their environment, how they're handled, how they're fed and cared for. It is important they have the opportunity to see firsthand what today's farm is all about, as of the fourth quarter of 2016, there were only 819 dairy farms left in Vermont.

The matter of regulations addressing water quality in Vermont, during the previous administration, came to focus on agriculture and resulted in public sentiment with a finger pointed at the dairy farmer. Vermont leads the nation in anaerobic digester projects, we have 14 operating digesters and had expected more projects to come along, but the process seems to have stalled. Today it seems the apparent downfall to moving forward is inadequate grant funding, unpredictable dairy economics, a failure to recognize the importance of this basic tool, and a punitive attitude directed toward agriculture; each has done little to instill confidence in the farmer.

I became a founding board member of "The Alliance" (VDPA) because I wanted to be part of the needed change, increase the voice and tell the story of so many farmers who make investments every year which serve to improve the environment, if recognized, the dollar value would be astounding.

Our digester project at Green Mountain Dairy cost \$ 2.75 million, it was very worthwhile, 3 years ago we purchased a dragline system for \$ 350,000, we can now pump from the manure pit to the field, from a distance of up to 2 miles, and inject manure into the soil. Our future plans include a gas scrubber \$ 180,000, followed by a dissolved air flotation device (DAF) \$400,000, something which separates up to 95 % of phosphorus from the waste stream in the form of a sludge which is both storable and stackable. This tool will give nutrient management new meaning.

The gas scrubber and DAF are both recent developments over the last two years, the dragline has been available in western New York for sometime longer, each of these tools are expensive but they make great strides in moving environmental quality to the forefront.

The State of Vermont no doubt recognizes the value of infrastructure which has resulted from the dairy industry, the \$ 2.2 billion that dairy brings to the table, and its 6,000 – 7,000 jobs, but with all this regulation and disparaging talk, farmers want to know if there is a future for dairy in Vermont ?

For continued investments to be made we need to be working shoulder to shoulder, not pointing the finger. We look forward to working with the General Assembly and the Administration.