



**Rural Vermont testimony to the House Committee on Agricultural and Forestry
Regarding H.218, a bill that would expand community sales of raw milk
2.23.2021**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, Madame Chair, and for your interest in working on this issue. My name is Mollie Wills and I am the Director of Grassroots Organizing with Rural Vermont, a member-led farm advocacy organization that has been working with raw milk farmers on this issue for about fifteen years, since raw milk was first regulated in the state. This is not a new issue. Equitable access to markets is something that has been identified by producers as necessary for economic viability for a long time.

A good place to start is revisiting some of the history about raw milk and why we're in the position that we are.

Raw milk has been consumed for thousands of years. Milk production moved off family farms and into concentrated urban environments in the 1800s, mostly due to commodification, which led to unsanitary conditions and so-called "swill milk". This resulted in outbreaks of raw milk linked sickness. By the turn of the century pasteurization was the norm, and remains that way despite dairies have vastly improved their practices and quality of milk.

Henry Point, a U.S. medical doctor, continued to see the benefit for treating chronic diseases with raw milk and started certifying Medical Milk in 1893 for use in hospitals. This program continued for nearly 100 years, as consumption of raw milk continued by farm families across the globe.

Today, dairy farms across the nation and Vermont are in crisis. According to the National Family Farm Coalition, on average, commodity dairy farmers are paid \$1.45 per gallon for milk it costs them \$2.00 to produce. Raw milk producers can ask \$12/gallon for raw milk in Vermont.

Raw milk production is a viable arm of Vermont's dairy industry and increases our food sovereignty and food security. There are not many options for those wanting to become a dairy farmer right now. If you're lucky, you have a family connection that can help get you access to a contact, or you can go into exorbitant debt to start a Large Farm Operation, or else invest in processing equipment to compete with an already tight value-added market.

There is significant demand for this food, and consumers are going through great lengths to access it for their families. Market access is currently inequitable and the viability of farmers' businesses depends significantly on their geographic location. This bill would provide more equitable access to markets for producers by giving them access to a market regardless of where their farm is located.

Within the COVID reality, we need this bill now more than ever. I and many others have seen empty grocery shelves for the first time our lives in Vermont and across the country. We need to invest in resilient community scale food systems that increase our food security.

It's in raw milk producer's best interests to value cleanliness and safety above all else. Regular milk sample testing for tier two producers helps ensure this standard. If milk testing regulations were to change, as was discussed earlier, to include human pathogens, the Agency of Agriculture would need to provide additional support to the raw dairy community, including paying for this testing and supporting farmers with sample delivery. Currently, most tier 2 producers hand deliver their samples to the State Lab in Randolph, the only FDA accredited lab in VT. One producer reported that it cost them \$272/month to deliver their samples to the State Lab. Farmers are simply not making enough money selling raw milk to make this economically viable. Rural Vermont is currently working with a lab based in New York state to provide milk sample pickup that is not available through the State of Vermont. This arrangement means that hard earned farmer dollars are unnecessarily leaving the state every month to pay for this service.

Small herd sizes and strict regulations have led to a good safety record for VT fluid raw milk producers, as we just heard. Farmers are able to be highly diligent and attentive to their processes. This type of farming encourages pasture-based grazing systems, which builds soils and sequesters carbon, while keeping animals cleaner and healthier than they would be if confined.

To speak to the insurance question that was raised: Yes, raw milk producers have insurance. It is not cheap or easy, and very few providers offer it. It's a huge hurdle for producers and it is something most raw producers invest in to protect themselves.

In closing, agriculture is in transition, nationally and here in Vermont. A rise in community scale, diversified operations are the future of farming, from an economic viability perspective, an ecological perspective, and a food security perspective. Raw milk producers are some of the more heavily regulated farmers in the state, yet they are strictly limited as far as where they can sell their products. Thank you for considering these meaningful changes to the raw milk law that would make it more equitable for all. Respectfully,

Mollie Wills
Director of Grassroots Organizing
Rural Vermont