



Date: October 10, 2024

To: Rep. Ashley Bartley

CC: Agricultural Worker Labor and Employment Laws Study Committee

From: Brian Carpenter, Chair

RE: Act 117; An act relating to expanding employment protections and collective bargaining rights

The Vermont Dairy Producers Alliance (VDPA) is composed of dairy farmers and partners of the farming industry. The Alliance supports and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while being mindful of the environmental impacts to Vermont's working landscape and waterways. The Alliance was formed to increase the voice of dairy farmers within the Legislative and Regulatory arenas. Members are from farms of all sizes working in conjunction with industry members to ensure a sustainable dairy sector in Vermont.

Dairy farming has become increasingly more difficult both financially and agriculturally. Milk pricing reflects a supply/demand balance of markets, both domestic and global, which at times falls below the cost of doing business, at the same time Vermont farmers have been working to improve farm practices for cost efficiencies, productivity and concerns pertaining to environmental quality.

Agricultural workers desire greater flexibility and independence at the farm rather than the uniformity that comes with collective bargaining and union representation. This is done through conversations with the farm owners. At this time, modifying or changing the law would only be a distraction to all of our work and would interfere with the employee/employer relationship when we see no compelling reason or issue that has been identified to need such change.

VDPA also adamantly opposes the right to strike. Creating and producing food is an essential industry as we witnessed during COVID. Hunger does exist and food supply management is crucial to the safety and wellbeing of our area. Vermont is the main supplier for milk products in New England. A strike in Vermont would cause prices to skyrocket even more than we have seen since COVID, as well as create a shortage in the supply chain which includes baby formula production. Disrupting this flow is not like turning on and off a spigot. When cows are not milked, they become sick and unhealthy and do not recover. This disruption could create a permanency which will affect the economy of Vermont, loss of jobs, and would create a void in school lunch programs and food banks. Crops need to be harvested, and for the health of cows, they must be milked on a regular schedule. Dairy and milk products are an essential staple to our communities, we cannot afford market disruptions. For these reasons, the federal government has deemed agriculture essential and therefore has an exemption. We strongly disagree with Vermont removing the exemption on a whim.

The number of Vermont farms has drastically declined in the past decade. VDPA was formed in 2015, and at that time, Vermont had over 1500 dairy farms and today we are down to only 471 in the dairy industry. As the UVM Extension reported, "Vermont has a total of 6,537 farms, down

4% from 2017 as well as 1,173,890 acres of farmland, but we lost 19,547 acres since 2017, to development. These declines are attributable in part to the loss of 313 dairy farms over the same five years, a drop of 37 percent.”

As you know, Vermont’s top brand, known nationally, is dairy and cheese. The declining number of farms reported is alarming.

“The number of milk cows declined less, by 18%, to 105,514. The fluid milk produced by our remaining 528 cow dairies accounts for 58% of all agricultural sales in Vermont. Furthermore, there are 265,275 forage acres, 110,962 pasture acres and 74,800 corn silage acres, most of which feed cows. These data show how important dairy is to our agricultural economy and landscape,” stated Dr. Vern Grubinger.

The remaining farms in Vermont primarily belong to cooperatives who are increasingly sensitive to housing and treatment of all farm workers. The relationship between farmers and consumers continues to evolve in this area. The majority of farms in Vermont through their cooperatives and customers have developed standards that must be met to ship their milk to that respective cooperative. The industry is self-regulating with third party audits which is designed to ensure protections for our consumers. VDPA supports this method of oversight and has seen increasing improvements from farms through this process. We feel the industry is the best way to manage and regulate for the good of the employees who work on farms. In addition to these programs in the industry, there are federal worker programs where strict guidelines must be met to gain the workers visas.

We ask you to let the “boots on the ground” continue the work they are doing while still pulling themselves out from Covid, inclement weather patterns, and fluctuating milk prices. We will assure you that we do our absolute best to invest and support our #1 asset, our employees.

We strongly request that this committee go very slowly and understand that agriculture is already struggling and if we want Vermont to continue to have the open land and working landscape, we need to work together, not add more regulations.