



February 19th, 2026

Chair Durfee and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony. My name is Kevin M. Kouri, and I am here on behalf of the Vermont Dairy Producers Alliance to express our respectful opposition to H.403. We fully understand and appreciate the goals behind this legislation. Ensuring safe housing, fair treatment, and dignified working conditions for agricultural workers is both essential and morally important. However, as currently drafted, H.403 presents significant challenges for Vermont's farms, especially small and family run operations—and may have consequences that undermine the very agricultural system it seeks to strengthen.

H.403 proposes to repeal the exemption of agricultural workers from Vermont's minimum wage law and to require overtime pay for workers who exceed 60 hours per week. For many farms, particularly dairy operations that run 365 days a year, this would lead to a substantial increase in labor expenses.

Agriculture is not a 40-hour workweek industry. Weather, animal care needs, and the short windows for planting and harvesting often demand long hours that cannot be redistributed or delayed. Many farms already operate on extremely thin margins, and absorbing these additional costs could threaten their ability to stay in business.

The bill requires farm employee housing to undergo mandatory inspections under the Vermont Residential Rental Housing Health and Safety Code. Farmers would be required to correct any violations and potentially face penalties for non-compliance.

While the goal of safe, quality housing is one we share, the requirements as written could impose considerable financial burdens. Upgrades, repairs, and code-mandated improvements may be beyond the reach of small farms, many of which are already struggling with rising energy, feed, and input costs. We are concerned that this provision, without additional state support or resources, may force some farms to reduce available housing or exit farming altogether.

H.403 requires farmers to facilitate state surveys regarding farm housing and includes penalties—up to \$1,000 per violation—for obstruction or failure to comply with housing standards. This adds new administrative demands and new avenues for liability during a time when most farms lack the staffing or technical capacity to manage complex regulatory oversight.

Even well-intentioned farmers could inadvertently violate procedural requirements, resulting in financial penalties that compound existing pressures.

Large farms may have resources to absorb new compliance costs, but we will remind the committee that milk prices are down by \$3.50 per hundred weight. However, small farms, which make up much of Vermont's agricultural landscape, cannot. Many are family-run operations where owners work alongside their employees daily. These farms often provide housing and treat workers as part of their extended farm family.

The cumulative effect of higher labor costs, new housing mandates, and administrative obligations could push smaller producers out of business. Once a farm closes, it is rarely replaced. Vermont risks accelerating the decline of its agricultural sector—reducing local food production, weakening rural communities, and shrinking the workforce opportunities the bill aims to protect.

In conclusion, Vermont's farmers are committed to treating their workers fairly and to providing safe, dignified housing. These values are woven into the fabric of our agricultural communities. **H.403, as drafted, places significant financial and operational burdens on farms at a time when many are already at a breaking point.**

We respectfully ask the Committee to consider amendments that:

- Recognize the economic realities of agricultural production.
- Provide financial or technical support for housing improvements.
- Phase in labor changes gradually.
- Protect the viability of small farms.
- Engage farmers and workers collaboratively in designing a workable solution.

Our shared goal should be legislation that improves conditions for workers **without jeopardizing the farms that employ them**. We stand ready to work with you on balanced policies that support both workers and the agricultural economy that sustains Vermont.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kevin M. Kouri

Chairperson of VDPA