

#61 Farmers Need More Help

Milk prices are scheduled to drop by \$5.00 per hundred weight. For many dairy farmers this means \$3000, \$50000 or \$7000 less revenue per month for the same amount of work. At the same time, transportation costs are spiraling upward faster than expected. Diesel fuel is heading towards \$5.00 a gallon and regular gas is approaching \$4.00 a gallon. Many farmers rent 2 - 4 times the land they own and must travel back and forth to these acres several times a day to deliver nutrients and harvest hay, silage, corn and other crops. In this time consuming and now unaffordable activity, it is farmers who make it possible for tens of thousands of acres of open space to remain free of development and thus preserve one of the main reasons so many are passionate about this region.

Tractors and other equipment that were \$25,000 are now \$50,000 or even much more. Very few farmers can purchase fertilizer this year because it is oil-based and escalating in price. In fact, oil based fertilizer has been unaffordable for many dairy farmers for a few years already. It can be spread on the land much faster and cheaper than organic nutrients but still is out of reach for many farmers. Yields of farm grown feed for dairy farmers will be down again and who knows what the weather will bring in challenges. The cost of concentrated feed, usually corn-based, is also skyrocketing due the bogus move towards corn to ethanol.

No one is talking about giving dairy farmers a larger part of the milk dollar. A major developer is asking for a guaranteed payment on amount invested for 30 years and a much higher share of revenues from gambling receipts. Farming, an absolutely essential industry, the county's largest industry, and the industry most responsible for maintaining the beauty that attracts people to visit and live here, the industry that really does spend more locally than any other business, does not receive the support of so-called more spectacular economic activity.

Dairy farmers are joined in this cost-price squeeze by farmers in general as well as people who keep just a few animals. Some will cut back in the number of animals they raise as hay and other feed stocks become too expensive to make. Perhaps many who raise beef, sheep, goats, or just have a horse or two, will find hay too expensive or simply not available.

Consumers, all of us, are joined in the experience of escalating food prices. We have lost control of our energy needs. We are about to lose control of our food needs. The two are linked. Among the poorest people at home and abroad, this is already a catastrophe.

One ray of hope and very tangible help is controlling energy costs through energy audits on farms and then installing subsidized energy conserving and renewable energy producing systems. Farmers understand costs must be lowered and that is where they still retain some control over their destiny. They get it more than others that savings in energy costs are available through investments in technologies that harvest the sun and the wind without expenditure of labor or time. However, it is a tough decision to make because it feels like a discretionary expense when the current bills come every month at much higher costs.

But, it's a start in the right direction. Right now and for the next 30 days only, farm energy audits are free to dairy farmers and a USDA and NYSERDA combined grant offers 75% incentive for renewable energy systems that can be installed before snow falls

again. Solar electric systems will offset from 1/3 to 1/2 or more of farm electric bills for the next 25 years and pay for themselves in about 7 years.

Larger solar electric systems and wind systems and other renewable energy technologies will be available in 2009. Throughout 2008, efforts will be made to align NYSEG policies, NYSERDA funding, town zoning and building codes, as well as county and state support for much greater economic assistance to farmers who are truly the most essential part of our communities. It remains a travesty that so little support is given to the farming industry which has provided so much to us and can have a very vibrant future if it receives the political and policy support it needs.