

Appreciate Farm To Preserve Family Life

PAINTED POST, N.Y. — New Yorkers must begin to understand and appreciate the family farm if that particular segment of American life is to be preserved, said New York State Grange Master William S. Benson Jr.

Benson, speaking to hundreds of Grangers gathered here at the opening banquet of the Grange's 123rd Annual Session, outlined a number of reasons for the decline of dairy farming in New York State.

He pointed to milk prices that stand dormant in the face of ever-increasing production costs as a major culprit, and said that unfair — and often illegal — property tax assessments take their toll, as well.

"In one case, a New York millionaire started a dairy farm as a hobby. When his ag assessment took effect, the assessors raised his house and barn assessments to pay for it," Benson said. "Having

the money, he took them to court and won. Unfortunately, the average farmer can't afford to take legal action."

Benson criticized milk pricing practices affecting New York dairy farmers as "ridiculous," and he was skeptical about 1995 Farm Bill attempts to "level the playing field" for eastern and Midwestern farmers.

"I believe that the playing field was already level," Benson said. "Now it will be tilted in favor of the Midwest."

Benson also rejected the notion that milk prices should not be raised for fear that consumers would be scared off of the product. "Children do not put root beer on cereal," Benson said. "The problem is not the increase in price to the consumer. The problem is that the increase would never get back to the farmer. Without some controls, the increase would be absorbed by the handlers, pro-

cessors, distributors and retailers who already take whatever they need to turn a reasonable profit."

Benson said farmers feel threatened by large corporate farms, and said dairy farmers need to keep an eye on the House Agriculture Committee, made up of 49 representatives. Seven of those representatives are from California — the number one dairy state in the country — and none are from New York.

Benson urged farmers to get more involved in shaping the future of their industry. "Not nearly enough of the farmers are being seen and heard," he said. "There must be farmer involvement to get the various farm organizations on a common general path to the future."

Benson said farmers may have to consider a supply control among themselves, and that he's hearing more and more support for the dairy industry's move to a quota system. He said such a system would allow the supply and price of milk to stabilize, and that the farmer could derive a reasonable profit in exchange for the opportunity to expand.

Benson's keynote speech came after Grangers met and shared concerns with Donald Davidson, recently appointed commissioner

of the state Department of Agriculture and Markets. "I'm counting on organizations like the

Grange to keep me posted on what's going on out there," Davidson said. "That's vital."

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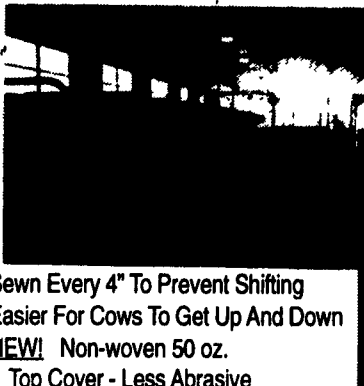
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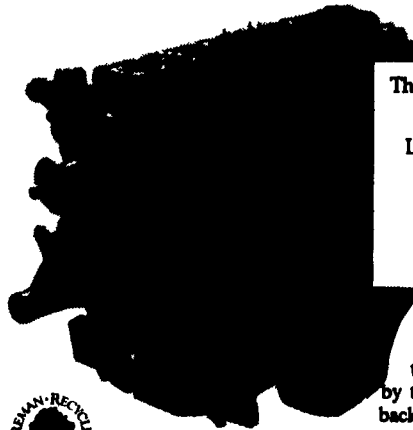
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