

# Ag Secretary Seeks Comments On National Cheese Exchange

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support for a milk strike during a series of meetings held in southern New York state and across the northern tier of Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Milk Producers Association is a 2-year-old organization founded by its president Marshall Wilson, an Elk County dairy farmer who tills 200 acres and milk 45 cows. He markets milk through Milk Marketing Inc.

According to Wilson, PMPA has 200 members and they have been working in cooperation with Tewksbury and Pro Ag in calling for a national strike.

He said that similar organizations in seven other states have joined PMPA in forming the United States Milk Producers Council, an independent organization comprised of the presidents and vice presidents of the different state affiliates.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, the PMPA and Pro Ag have had a number of opinion articles published recently in farm publications that have urged dairy farm families to bond together in a common effort to secure a price for milk that reflects cost of production.

According to Wilson, his organization's latest projection of cost of production for a hundredweight of milk is \$17.77.

Withholding milk, as a last resort, is the main power upon which the groups are basing their strategy to achieve that cost of production.

## No Strike For Now

However, according to a news release this week from Pro Ag, and according to Wilson, the strike has been postponed for at least three weeks, as a result of a Feb. 10 meeting at the Keystone College in Scranton between dairy producers, the dairy support industry of northeastern Pennsylvania, and U.S. Sens. Arlen Specter, Rick Santorum, and U.S. Ag Secretary Glickman

## Cost Of Production

Other dairy and farmer groups, such as the National Farmers Organization and the National Farmers Union, have also promoted national milk pricing policies that are based on the cost of production.

However, the actual cost of dairy production varies greatly.

All things being equal, there are economies of size that factor against small family farms.

Beyond that, personal skills, knowledge, abilities, proximity to processors, road conditions, local competition, and farm management strategies vary greatly and present perhaps the greatest obstacle to pricing milk according to the cost of production.

Determining whose farming style should set an industry standard for cost of production seems to be the greatest barrier to achieving such a standard price.

While such a standard does not seem inconceivable to determine (though complicated), even if some new formula would be created to standardize the cost of production, it would seem impossible to achieve complete agreement among dairy producers.

In general, the number of dairy farms has been continuing to decline year after year while the amount of milk produced has increased. This could indicate that production lost through the exit of dairy farms is not only being picked up by expanding operations, but that those expansions are increasing the total amount of milk, and thus lowering the market value of milk.

It also indicates, as statistics bear out, that dairy production is coming more and more from the larger operations.

That continuing trend can be expected to also mean that the divide between cost efficiencies of the different dairy operations is gradually widening, putting more pressure on the smaller farms competing in the same market.

Some smaller farms have been switching production and marketing strategies, such as grazing to lower operational cash flow and debt requirements, or attempting to garner a premium price by supplying specialty markets, such as the "organic" market.

However, Pro Ag and the Pennsylvania Milk Producers Association have stated that their demand of a price received that reflects their members' cost of production must be met or a strike will occur.

## Meeting In Scranton

According to Andy Wallace, Sen. Specter's northeast Pennsylvania regional administrator (in the Scranton office), and a staff employee for 14 years, the Feb. 10 meeting was put together within a week, and resulted from numerous farmer meetings that have been occurring during the past several months.

"It was the largest meeting of dairy farmers ever in Pennsylvania," he said. "There were not only dairy farmers, there were feed

growers, veterinarians, bankers. The (misconception) is that (the low milk price and the loss of dairy farms) affects just the farmer, but it's affecting the entire economy, feed suppliers, etc., the support industry to the consumer."

According to Sen. Specter's staff in Scranton, about 750 attended the Feb. 10 meeting.

Wilson said if he would have had more notice he could have been able to inform more of his members.

Wallace said that staff members have been attending some of the farmer meetings. He said that the meetings shouldn't be considered Pro Ag meetings or PMPA meetings, but instead they should be considered farmer meetings.

He said his office has been made aware of the problem and that the entire Pennsylvania delegation — including Representatives such as 10th District Rep. Joseph McDade whose district includes Scranton — has been concerned and working to bring some relief.

At the request of Sen. Specter and Sen. Santorum, U.S. Secretary

of Agriculture Glickman also attended the meeting.

The meeting was held on a Monday morning, the same day as the annual meeting and Cornucopia event of the Pennsylvania State Council of Farm Organizations in the Harrisburg Capitol.

Planned for months ahead of time, the Cornucopia provides farm organization and industry representatives an opportunity to discuss with state Legislators the current conditions of their respective industry(ies) and issues affecting them.

The state Legislature is in the beginning stages of a new legislative session and developing new proposals.

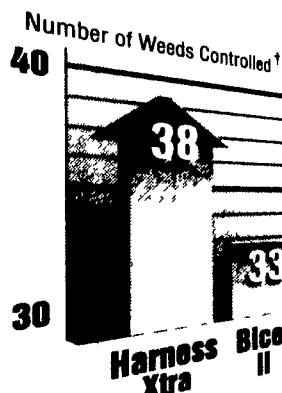
But according to many reports from different sources, at the meeting in Scranton, local farmers, dairy industry support business representatives, and some local representatives of the state's major agricultural organizations and others testified about the injury to Pennsylvania's northeast dairy producers, and the potential devas-

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