

Maryland's \$1 Billion Dairy Industry At Critical Junction

Maryland Dairy Industry Association

Maryland's dairy industry is at a crossroads. Its future direction and viability depends upon industry and government leaders who are committed to the benefits of a local source of fresh, high-quality dairy products, an attractive open landscape, and continuance of a productive way of life for future generations of rural families.

Dairy farming remains one of Maryland's most important commodity groups, ranking third in economic importance in the state's largest single industry, agriculture. Farm families produced 1.29 billion pounds of milk in 2001, netting cash receipts of \$208 million. Nearly 750 farm families tended 82,000 dairy cows throughout the state. An estimated 350,000 acres of productive open space is dedicated to dairy farming, protecting and nurturing an appealing rural environment.

Maryland milk is delivered to more than a dozen dairy processing plants, providing local citizens with a wide array of fresh dairy products, including more than 600 million quarts of milk and 26 million gallons of ice cream annually. Agriculture, including dairy production and processing, employs more than 300,000 workers.

But Maryland continues to lose dairy farms at an alarming rate, more than 200 farms in the past six years, far greater than regional U.S. averages. The Maryland Dairy Industry Association (MDIA) is dedicated to stopping this loss and protecting this important \$1 billion-plus state industry. It needs the active and dedicated support of elected officials, policymakers, regulators, educators, business leaders, and all members of the dairy industry.

Dairy issues are both state and federal in nature. Here are state challenges that merit attention and consideration:

- **Maryland Dairy Quality Management Program** — Three years ago, the Maryland General Assembly passed, and Governor Glendening signed, legislation to assist state dairy producers in improving business management, production efficiency, and on-farm profits. It was never funded, even after repeated efforts by MDIA and other groups. It would form the foundation for bringing Maryland into the highly successful Regional Dairy Quality Management Alliance, already operating in 12 surrounding states. Despite lack of support from the state, the dairy industry initiated five pilot programs on Maryland dairy farms. These now need to be expanded into the MDQMP program with state

funding, which includes critical public health and food safety protection for all of the state's citizens.

- **Nutrient Management Regulations** — State and federal environmental regulations are being promulgated to control runoff from farms and livestock operations into tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. Overall, this is a good initiative, and dairy producers support it. They are the state's best environmentalists, for they make their living from the land. But practicality and reason must be incorporated into such regulations, and cost-sharing of the thousands of dollars in required investment must be part of the program. Maryland cannot afford to penalize its remaining dairy producers, and jeopardize their concentrated livestock operations through unrealistic regulations. The dairy industry must be a part of any decision-making and oversight process.

- **School Lunch Programs** — Purchases, promotion, and availability of nutritious milk and dairy products in school breakfast and lunch programs are mainly a county or local issue. It's difficult for the cash-strapped dairy industry to compete with product-connected cash contracts offered to schools by the soft drink and snack industries. But the dairy industry has initiated pilot programs to produce more attractive packaging, and on in-school vending machines to place milk and dairy products before students. Assistance in placing dairy products in educational institutions through regulatory, administrative, or cost-sharing initiatives is critically important and needed for the life-long health benefits of America's next generation.

- **Farmland Preservation and Land Use** — Economic pressures to develop open spaces in Maryland are acute. Farmland throughout Maryland continues to shift from dairy and crop production to commercial development and other uses. During the past five years, the state has lost more than 5,000 acres of cropland, mainly to urban and suburban development. Dairy farming remains one of the most appealing and attractive uses of open spaces, especially in the northern and Piedmont areas of the state. Local, county, and state farmland preservation programs must be adopted and enforced, and incentives developed to keep producers on the farm as good stewards of the land.

- **Dairy Product Promotion** — Milk is one of nature's most perfect foods, and should be promoted as a source of nutrition and good health. Maryland has recently initiated an osteoporosis prevention

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