

Written Testimony of Michael P McMahon EZ Acres LLC Dairy Farmer
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Subcommittee: Livestock and Foreign Agriculture

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To Chairman Costa, Ranking Member Rouzer and Honorable Members of the
Livestock and Foreign Agriculture Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony concerning the current state of the dairy industry. I would like to address two major challenges to dairy in this country – labor, specifically immigrant labor, and environmental sustainability.

Labor is always an issue in dairy. In 1995 our farm moved out of four old barns and into a new state of the art facility. One of our goals was to stop the endless turnover of labor that we had been experiencing in our previous situation. With comfortable working conditions, reasonable hours and being able to pay a higher wage due to modern efficiencies we felt this would be an easy accomplishment. However after five years it was obvious that it wasn't happening. My wife Edie who is responsible for our payroll calculated that she had issued an average of 39 W-2s per year over those five years to maintain a crew of 10 full time workers. In January 2000 we replaced half our crew with Latino workers and instantly saw a change. Over the next five years the average number of W-2s issued was 18 which included part time people for the cropping season. It was a remarkable change given the cost in time and money to constantly train new people. Not only did turnover nearly stop but we found in the migrant workers a work ethic, animal handling skills and a level of respect for coworkers and owners alike that seem to be lost in the local workforce.

While it is not in this Committee's jurisdiction, immigrant labor is absolutely critical to my operation. Regardless of the unemployment rate in our county – local labor doesn't want to milk cows. A 2017 Texas A&M study found that 79% of the US milk supply is impacted by Hispanic workers. Agriculture needs a way to

secure an immigrant workforce that is steady, willing, able and LEGAL. We need to bring the multitude of indispensable agricultural workers who are *already here* out of the shadows without major disruption to the workforce. Let's find out who they are and if there are felons among them then they cannot stay. These workers are already contributing greatly to our food system. They paid thousands of dollars to cross the border and thousands more for forged documents, enriching the drug cartels who provide these services. The United States might better have collected that money for processing and issuing work permits. I realize that immigration is a political minefield, but agriculture's need for immigrant labor is undeniable. America needs a safe and abundant food supply produced within its borders. Food security is part of homeland security.

I would also like to touch on sustainability. New York and the Northeast are blessed with luxuriant water. This, and a temperate climate make us well suited as a current and future dairy region. It differentiates us from other milk producing areas such as the Southwest. This abundant water also presents dairy with challenges – for us environmental sustainability equates with water quality protection. My farm is situated in an environmentally sensitive area with 70 % of my land in the northern part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, and 30% in the Skaneateles Lake Watershed which provides unfiltered drinking water to 230,00 people of the city of Syracuse. It also lies over a sole-source aquifer which supplies water to about 24,000 people in our town. We also have two naturally stocked trout streams that run through our farm. Our opportunities to pollute are many, and we take our responsibility to protect water seriously.

Our approach is based on the simple concept of balancing the amount of “nutrients” we import onto the farmstead each year- mainly in the form of feed and fertilizer- with the amounts of nutrients exported in the form of milk, meat and manure. The main nutrients of concern with regard to water quality are Nitrogen (N) and Phosphorus (P). Typically more of these come onto the farm than are exported. Excessive accumulations of these nutrients are lost to the environment and present a risk to surface and ground water. So we REDUCE the amount of nutrients brought onto the farm by tailoring feed and fertilizers to meet but not exceed animal and crop needs, REUSE the nutrients by proper

storage of manure and timing of application to growing crops, and RECYCLE them into abundant homegrown forage and grains to feed our cows.

This concept is referred to as “Nutrient Mass Balance”. It was pioneered by Dr. Danny Fox of the Department of Animal Science at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences of Cornell University. It is carried on today under the program name “Nutrient Management Spear Program” by Dr. Quirine Ketterings and associates. Information about the NMSP can be found at <http://nmsp.cals.cornell.edu>. From beginning balance measurements in the pilot program in 2003 we have been able to reduce the amount of N remaining on the farm by 33% and the P remaining on the farm by 135%. These are significant reductions. They also translate to reduced input costs, enhanced animal and soil health and contribute to economic sustainability. Wells sampled for Nitrates ppm along the valley we farm (including the Village Municipal well) although never at levels of concern have shown marked reductions in nitrate levels since 1997.

Every farm in water sensitive areas regardless of size can implement some or all of this approach. The data collection required to calculate the Nutrient Mass Balance is not arduous. Most information is reasonably available from well managed operations. NMB analysis of farmsteads can raise awareness of the opportunities to reduce nutrient imports and their associated costs and incentivize dairymen to adopt nutrient reducing management practices. Every pound of N and P we don't import is a pound we don't have to worry about winding up in our water.

There are few people who farm the land that don't agree that something is changing with our climate. Extreme weather events and excessive rainfall are occurring with increasing frequency. The annual average rainfall in New York has increased by 5” from 1895 – 2016. Our locality has seen three “hundred year storms” in the past 10 years. This means we have to get better just to stay even.

What can government do to help? I suggest the following:

- Fund field staff at the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service and the local Soil and Water District level to help develop and implement nutrient management plans on farms of all sizes.

- See that there is adequate funding for land grant colleges to be responsive to applied needs such as the NMB program and conduct outreach.
- Encourage interagency cooperation between land grant colleges, NRCS and Soil and Water Districts.
- Continue to fund EQIP grants so farmers can better address resource concerns like manure storage. be.