



Legislative Watch

Issues important to today's dairy farmers

Michigan Agriculture Industry Supports Proactive, Aggressive Stance on Animal Care

Several members of Michigan's Agriculture community recently provided testimony in support of House Bills 5127 and 5128 which would ensure that holistic and definitive animal care standards are established in state law for farm animals raised in Michigan, and the standards can be modified with public input to adapt to evolving science. See "MMPA Matters" on page 5 of this issue to read MMPA President Ken Nobis' viewpoint on this legislation.

The bills are sponsored by Representatives Mike Simpson (D-Jackson) and Jeff Mayes (D-Bay City) and have the support of a broad-based agricultural coalition that includes the Dairy Farmers of America, GreenStone Farm Credit Services, Michigan Agri-Business Association, Michigan Allied Poultry Industries, Michigan Cattlemen's Association, Michigan Corn Growers Association, Michigan Equine Partnership, Michigan Farm Bureau, Michigan Milk Producers Association, Michigan Pork Producers Association, Michigan Sheep Breeders Association, Michigan Soybean Association and Michigan Veterinary Medical Association. The legislation also has the support of the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA).

"The agriculture community respects that some consumers want reassurance that farm animals raised for food are well cared for. This legislation validates the ethical standards demonstrated by Michigan's livestock farmers and assures families that the meat, milk and eggs on their tables have been raised with the highest safety and

accountability standards," said Sam Hines, executive vice president of the Michigan Pork Producers Association.

Many livestock sectors already adhere to national animal care standards, but standards are still being developed for some species. House Bills 5127 and 5128 would require that animal care standards be adopted and enforced on Michigan farms with the aid of third-party audits and penalties to bring farms into compliance.

Given the state's limited budget resources, coalition members say House Bills 5127 and 5128 are smart to propose using existing scientific standards that are nationally accepted by food companies and retailers as a foundation to build from, and requiring that the standards be reviewed once every five years—at a minimum—to ensure that the latest and most advanced standards are followed in Michigan.

They also say forming a citizen-based Animal Care Advisory Council to review the standards and make recommendations to the Michigan Commission of Agriculture and MDA for ultimate adoption is only appropriate, as the council provides a public structure and the Agriculture Commission and MDA are the state entities charged with oversight of production agriculture and food safety. To ensure that the council is "evenly stacked" for fair representation of all stakeholders, only two farmers directly involved in production agriculture would be appointed. The remainder of the council would be comprised of

veterinarians as well as individuals representing an animal welfare agency, animal welfare research, restaurants and Michigan's food processing and retail food industries.

"This system would give Michigan the most proactive approach in the nation to making changes to animal care standards and ensure that everyone has a voice," said Larry Julian, legislative liaison for the Michigan Equine Partnership.

Dr. Janice Swanson, director of animal welfare with the Michigan State University Department of Animal Science, is neutral on the legislation, but in providing expert testimony lent credibility to the utilization of industry standards as a measuring stick for animal care.

"If you asked me 10 years ago I would have said no," she said, explaining that animal care standards initially started out as industry-led initiatives that were limited in scope. However, as more food companies have taken an active interest over the years, the marketplace has dictated science-based standards and more public input in the process. "So many of the standards in place today are very scientific and multi-disciplinary. They consider all factors from animal behavior to animal health and food safety, and you need this holistic approach."

Swanson points out that many of the standards that House Bills 5127 and 5128 would codify address animal care for livestock in all types of housing; this includes animals in cages as well as cage-free systems. Legislative initiatives

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in other states like California have focused exclusively on behavioral freedom and, depending on how the performance standards are legally interpreted, they could conflict with an animal's natural behavior, she said. For instance, hens are flocking animals, so providing California-raised hens enough room to extend their wings and turn around without touching another hen could prove challenging to meet compliance even under cage-free housing conditions.

Coalition members emphasize that animal care standards mandated by House Bills 5127 and 5128 go beyond emotion-driven agendas that narrowly focus on single issues such as animal housing and farm size.

"They take into consideration everything involved in providing food safety, animal welfare, and a wholesome and affordable food supply," said George House, executive director of Michigan Allied Poultry Industries.

The proposed legislation doesn't go to unnecessary extremes but doesn't under-deliver on animal care either, said Wayne Wood, president of the Michigan Farm Bureau and an MMPA Member.

"The intent of the legislation is sound, and that's to guarantee the continued care and ethical treatment of all animals in the food chain," said Wood. "These bills provide a holistic, balanced approach that is good for animals, people, rural communities and our state."

The House Agriculture Committee took initial testimony on June 24 and 25. An identical package of bills, 654 and 655, has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Wayne Kuipers (R-Holland) and Gerald VanWoerkom (R-Norton Shores). These bills also have the support of the broad-based agricultural coalition, and have been referred to the Senate Agriculture and Bioeconomy Committee for future action.

NMPF Tells Congress: Economic "Catastrophe" Facing Dairy Farmers

Dairy farmers across the country are facing "an unprecedented financial catastrophe," and Congress needs to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work on measures to help farmers survive the situation, according to testimony from National Milk Producers Federation, during a hearing in the House of Representatives intended to examine the causes and possible solutions to dairy's economic crisis.

Tom Wakefield, dairy farmer from Bedford, Penn., and board member of NMPF, told the House Subcommittee on Livestock and Dairy that the sudden loss of export markets, due largely to the global economic crisis, has plunged farmers into financial crisis, as prices have dropped along with lost export markets.

"Because the U.S. market had gradually increased production to respond to the international market signals being sent in recent years that indicated higher demand for U.S. dairy products, U.S. producers found the rug pulled out from under them" when those export markets largely evaporated last fall, Wakefield said.

Wakefield also discussed potential responses to the situation, reiterating NMPF's request that USDA temporarily raise the purchase price levels for cheese and nonfat dry milk in order to return higher prices to farmers.

In a letter sent June 26 to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, NMPF requested that the USDA raise the purchase price for cheese blocks from \$1.13/lb. to \$1.19; raise the purchase price for barrel cheese from \$1.10 to \$1.16/lb.; and raise the purchase price for nonfat dry milk powder from \$0.80/lb. to \$0.84.

Wakefield also asked that Congress work with the USDA to fully utilize the Dairy Export

Incentive Program in the coming months, which can help export additional quantities of milk powder, cheese and butter.

"We are appreciative of the step USDA took to announce the full allocations for the current DEIP year and hope to see the critical next step of opening the bidding process to use the entire amount of the allocations soon thereafter," Wakefield said.

He discussed measures that dairy farmers themselves are taking to address their plight, such as aggressively using the Cooperatives Working Together program to remove more than 100,000 cows from the national dairy herd this spring, and then initiating yet another herd retirement effort.

"Dairy producers have spent \$115 million of their own hard-earned money this year on our most recent herd retirement program, the largest one in CWT's history, and are prepared to spend up to \$160 million more in subsequent rounds of our program in the near future," he said.

He also pointed out that NMPF has created a Strategic Planning Task Force to analyze and develop a long-term strategic plan to positively impact on the various factors influencing both supply and demand for milk and dairy products.

"Through a round of listening sessions, the Task Force will bring in organized producer groups representing different segments and constituencies all across the country to obtain widespread input and access to the best ideas," Wakefield said. "We believe this is the best way to get input from the producer community in order to develop a plan for the future which can be embraced across the many dairy-producing regions of America."