

New England Grange Legislative Meeting

Good Will Grange Hall

Glastonbury, CT

May 31, 2003

Following the call to order by CT Legislative Director Gordon Gibson, F. Philip Prelli, Master of the CT State Grange, welcomed the twenty-four attendees. Included were ME State Master Steven Verrill, NH State Master John H. West, and VT State Master Phyllis Mason as well as Past CT State Master Russell Gray. Directors present were Mike Molodich, the CT Ag. Director; Charles Madison, the VT Ag. Director; Bill and Ann Rust, the ME Ag. Directors; Carl St. Don, the MA Legislative Director; Larry Shea, MA Ag. Director; Walter Elwell, RI Ag. Director; Norma Elwell, RI State Pomona and member of the Ag. Department, and a number of department members from the various states.

The first speaker was Robin Chesmer, Director of "Very Alive," a CT group which pushes benefits for agriculture. He is also the Director of the CT Farmland Trust, Inc., the purpose of which is to preserve farms in CT. He showed slides of his farming operation in Lebanon, CT, where he milks over 300 head of cattle but is struggling to survive with many layoffs of workers and a return to doing more and more on the farm himself. He noted that dairy farms are the perfect wildlife habitat and have a major impact on the landscape of CT. His farm hosts tours including a "Walking Weekend" each fall and "Back Roads Tours" with hired buses to take people around the back roads of town. He contrasted his operation with ones he visited in WI, where everything is much bigger. The cuts necessary to preserve the more costly New England farms affect others, including vets, equipment dealers, etc. It is hard for young folks to get into farming because of the investment required. Chesmer noted that there is widespread popular support for the continuation of farming establishments, but we need to learn to harness that support.

The second speaker, Robert Jacquier, is a dairy farmer and representative in the former Northeast Dairy Compact. He is also a retired Director of Agri-Mark. His family farm is located in North Canaan, CT, and involves three generations and a herd of over 800 milking cows. In discussing the farmers' plight, he urged the return to the Dairy Compact or something like it ... a market driven thing. More pressure needs to be put on the USDA. He referred to cooperatives which operate a self run program buying dairy products and shipping them elsewhere to dry up the market glut somewhat. He emphasized that the current government "solution" brings a sort of band-aid program, whereas the Compact "brought checks with dignity."

Finally Bonnie Burr, the Director of Government Relations for the CT Farm Bureau, shared the outlook from that organization. Among her suggestions was the necessity for all agriculture groups to keep in contact and share their viewpoints. The dairy industry must agree to work together if the government is deal with problems. We can't just wait for the government to act. We must take charge ourselves. Concerns include how to get rid of the 2.7% oversupply of dairy products and how to get the rest of the country to cooperate with New England. Thirty-eight percent of the liquid dairy

market is in this area. Many people would buy locally if they knew those products were available and would even pay extra for it!

Following the noon break, Phil Prelli and visiting State Masters reported on follow up actions taken since the March 1, 2003, meeting. Prelli referred to the letter signed by all six New England State Masters and forwarded to National Grange Legislative Director Leroy Watson, who was to distribute it to the Congressmen and Senators from New England.

John West from NH shared NH Legislative Director Jim Tetreault's list of actions taken in their state. These included corresponding with the NH Congressional delegation about supporting HR 324 relative to the dairy industry; representation at the NH Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture; representation at the May 16, 2003, NH Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture dairy crisis briefing for NH legislators and reporters; and involvement in the 2003 National Grange Fly-in in Washington, DC, with personal lobbying of the Congressional delegation. West also distributed packets including options for where the regional Grange legislative group could go. One suggestion was to work for change through the legislative process with active lobbying for passage of legislation we support. The alternate proposal was to support the National Milk Producers Federation and the industry's self help initiative. There was insufficient time to thoroughly read the proposals at this meeting, but those in attendance felt it was important to continue to push for the return of the Dairy Compact. We were urged to contact our government representatives directly, rather than through the National Grange Legislative office and to look for direct response. It was noted that Phyllis Mason of VT had received a written response to the letter the Masters signed; no one else had. She had sent it directly herself.

Attention was called to Dave Meredith, who heads a private group in NC trying to deal with the land preservation process. Their activities are being looked at by CT. It seems wise for us to strongly consider getting behind the preservation of agricultural land here in New England. ME has in the works a bond issue to raise \$2 million more for land preservation.

Note was made of a website for a group of which Gordon Gibson is President. It is ctfarmland.org. Members were urged to check it out.

Steve Verrill of ME encouraged us to pay attention to the milk protein concentrate issue, which affects cheese prices. ME Senator Susan Collins has introduced a bill to plug holes in the issue. We should also support further tariff controls. Verrill is to send us e-mailed copies of bills being proposed.

The question was raised about whether we should push for State Grange resolutions relative to the issues we are discussing in order that they may be sent to National Grange. It turned out that dairy exports and imports are dealt with already on page 8 of the National Grange Legislative Policy book.

Another suggestion was to place more emphasis in State Grange publications on what our group is doing. Phil Prelli also suggested that monthly updates from Leroy Watson about the status of our issues would be helpful. Legislative and Agriculture Directors not already in on the monthly conference calls with Leroy should make arrangements to participate.

The next N.E. Legislative Meeting will be on at 10:00 AM, September 6, 2003, at the State Grange Museum in Rutland, MA. Mary Jordan will be asked to distribute directions.