

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 15, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Vilsack:

Organic dairy farms in the Northeast represent the backbone of our rural economies. These farmers lead by example with their climate and environmental sustainability commitments and are critical to the resilience of our food supply and national security. Sadly, organic dairies in our region face an existential threat from inconsistent implementation and enforcement of organic rules, consolidation, and infrastructure underinvestment. We ask you use any resources at your disposal to take immediate action to support these farms and allow them to continue providing critical benefits to our communities.

When Danone/Horizon announced their intent to end their contracts with 89 organic dairy farms in the Northeast, 27 organizations came together to create the Northeast Dairy Task Force and provide recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on ways to help the organic dairy industry. Not long after the Task Force was established, Maple Hill notified 46 additional organic dairy farms in New York that they would soon be ending their contracts. Despite the recent announcement that Danone will be providing further assistance to impacted farmers, the underlying structural threats to organic dairy in the Northeast remain and urgent action is needed.

The Task Force's recommendations are broken up into subgroups. Solutions to our region's challenges must address market development (including institutional and consumer markets), processing expansion, distribution logistics improvement, farm business viability, and the implementation and enforcement of critical organic standard rules to protect the integrity of the organic label.

At a House Committee on Agriculture hearing on January 20, 2022, you said your team would be meeting and responding to the Task Force in the very near future with answers as to what USDA can do to help. We appreciate your personal attention to this matter and request that this work commence without delay. To effectively coordinate USDA's response to this crisis, we also ask you appoint a specific staff member at USDA who will act as the point person for the federal response to support Northeast organic dairy farms.

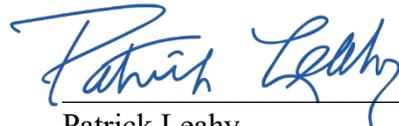
Additionally, we request you fully utilize existing USDA resources, initiatives, and authorities to implement the Task Force's recommendations. Your broad funding authority, including the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and the Commodity Credit Corporation, and your stated commitment to invest in supply chains, new market opportunities, and support agricultural communities align with our request. We ask you prioritize the Northeast organic dairy market and work to improve transportation and distribution logistics, improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency, and expand and enhance dairy processing infrastructure in our region, all critical needs identified by the Task Force.

We appreciate your urgent attention to the matter and your vocal support for our organic dairy industry. We hope USDA resources can quickly be put behind these needed solutions and that our organic dairy industry can continue to serve local communities, schools, families, and our environment for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
Member of Congress



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



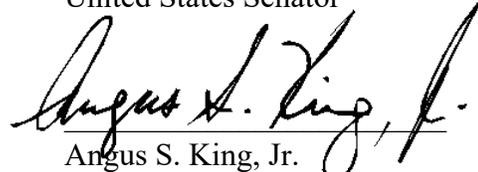
Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



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