

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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<http://www.workingtheland.com/feature-cream-strawberries.htm>

Thinking of Connecticut Cream & Strawberries

A Shelton Farmer's Early-Morning Report from the Field

May 13, 2007

Connecticut lost 10 percent of its dairy farms in 2006. Working Lands Alliance, a coalition of organizations dedicated to protecting Connecticut's farmland, estimates that state dairy farms manage (own and lease) up to 100,000 acres of working farmland in the state, of a total 360,000 acres of farmland. Shelton farmer Terry Jones got to thinking about this while tending to his strawberry field during a frosty spring morning.

It is 3:00 a.m. and I am in my strawberry field preparing to start frost protection by sprinkling water on the blossoms. The thermometer reads 30 degrees Fahrenheit. For the last 40 spring seasons - longer than any other living Connecticut farmer - I've followed this ritual.

Tonight is unique with a faint curtain of the Northern Lights streaming down from the polar sky as a crescent moon slides above the eastern horizon. But the joy of the natural beauty is somewhat diminished by a combination of sleep deprivation and concern for the strawberry crop that is my livelihood.

And I find myself wondering; will there be Connecticut cream to complement our local strawberries? My mind is very much on our state's dairy families and pending legislation to help their farms survive.

Our dairy farmers are struggling to do the seeming impossible - stay in business while having to sell their fresh milk at a regulated price, often lower than the cost of production here in New England.

Who cares?

Connecticut should care. Nutrition, health, and environmental quality are front burner issues here. CT-Grown fresh milk and other farm products help our citizens have access to wholesome, nutritious food. And keeping the 100,000 acres cropped by our state's dairy farmers green and growing is good environmental policy.

Meanwhile arcane regulations, a handful of economically and politically powerful processors, and a production trend that concentrates cows into mega-herds of up to 10,000 animals each out in the western states determine federal milk pricing.

I will share with you some telling images from a day I spent recently on a dairy farm in the region. The 200 cows in 'residence' produce fresh milk for over a thousand families to enjoy. The cows graze on grass and eat corn silage grown on several hundred acres that helps keep the hometown green and not completely overrun by sprawling residential development.

The owners are a family with four generations living together on the land in a cluster of historic homes near the dairy barn. Farming was never easy, but today their economic struggle is poignant. Family income from the dairy is below poverty level. Their two young children now qualify for reduced price school lunches.

Yet the family is an exemplary steward of their land and keeper of their cows. I observed the animals were both comfortable and friendly. The baby calves were healthy. One mother cow was being nurtured in a separate stall after a setback while giving birth to her first calf. She would live because the farm family cares about keeping their herd healthy.

In the same way, the State of Connecticut also needs to keep our dairy families healthy. We need to nurture them back to economic health, and restore financial stability to their livelihoods.

In Connecticut we should care. Our beautiful farmland, peaceful cows, dedicated farm families, and the nutritious food they collectively produce are worth it!

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Terry Jones is Chairman of Working Lands Alliance, a statewide coalition committed to increasing farmland preservation.