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Dairy groups call on USDA to expedite emergency assistance during COVID-19 crisis

MADISON, Wis. — Groups representing dairy farmers and cooperatives in the Midwest today urged the federal government to provide direct assistance to farmers and to expedite the purchase of additional dairy foods amid unprecedented disruptions in supply and demand due to the COVID-19 national emergency.

In a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the groups cited the mass closure of restaurants, schools and other food service outlets, decimated export markets and a sharp drop in prices farmers are being paid for their milk.

“Direct relief to dairy farmers and a substantial purchase of dairy commodities by USDA can ensure our industry will remain fiscally able to function in its primary role of feeding the nation and the world,” the groups said.

[The letter](#) was issued jointly by Cooperative Network, Dairy Business Association, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative, Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, Wisconsin Farm Bureau and Wisconsin Farmers Union.

Dairy processors and farmers are working in cooperation and with open lines of communication, but these circumstances, far beyond their control, are beginning to result in fresh farm milk finding no available market for processing. Commodity dairy prices have plummeted and will result in milk prices lower than many farms can handle to sustain long-term viability, according to the groups.

The dairy groups urged the USDA to consider the different means available to the agency to make farmers whole for the milk they have produced but needed to dispose, or for which they received drastically reduced payments.

In pushing for product purchases, the groups specifically asked USDA to focus on non-fat dry milk, butter, cheddar, mozzarella, other Italian styles of cheese, and dairy products purposed for use by restaurants and food service vendors.

The recently passed CARES Act directs \$14 billion to the Commodity Credit Corporation, \$9.5 billion to a dedicated disaster relief fund for agriculture, \$25 billion for SNAP programs and \$450 million to support food banks serving the food insecure.

“This bill enables unprecedented support for farmers and unprecedented commodity purchases, and we need USDA to bring these forms of aid to bear immediately,” the letter said.

Below are comments from each of the dairy organizations:

“Dairy manufacturers have seen their largest market channel — food service sales to restaurants, schools, colleges, and destinations — deeply cut in the effort to curb the spread of COVID-19. Sales lost at hundreds of thousands of restaurants and institutions cannot be replaced, and our industry looks to the U.S. government to purchase dairy products to move to food pantries and family feeding programs.”
— **Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association**

“During this is a time of great uncertainty, the government must act quickly to provide assistance to those who supply the world’s food with more stability. In the dairy space, that means farmers should have confidence that they will be paid for all the milk they produce. There is also a need for the mass purchase of dairy products to help markets adjust to this new environment.”
— **Dairy Business Association and Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative**

“The dairy industry is facing unprecedented challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential that every possible means of support be given to Wisconsin dairy farmers and cooperatives as quickly as possible. This support should include increased government purchases and distribution of dairy products from cold storage.” — **Cooperative Network**

“America’s freedom, strength and future hinges on its ability to feed its people. We must make sure that this crisis doesn’t leave America weak by our inability to deliver food to our own people. There is no good reason for Americans to go hungry while our farms are the most capable and efficient in the world. We need immediate action.” — **Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin**

“In a time when normal seems to be something from the past, we are looking to Secretary Perdue to recognize the importance of Wisconsin dairy farmers to the nation’s food security. Dairy farmers need assistance and this is the first step to attempt to help keep them farming and providing the safest food supply in the world.”
— **Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation**

“America's dairy farmers are doing everything they can to support the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular making sure that American households have a steady supply of milk and other dairy products. The economic disruption of the past several weeks has had dire consequences for U.S. dairy farmers. Wisconsin Farmers Union urges the USDA to take swift action to help dairy farmers so they can in turn help others at this critical time.” — **Wisconsin Farmers Union**

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