

Congresswoman Elise Stefanik/NY 21 Statement:

I apologize that my schedule precluded me from being here today since Congress is in session, but I wanted to send along a statement with my thoughts and work on North Country dairy issues.

Agriculture is the backbone of our economy in this district and the success of our farmers is critical to the health of our region. Throughout my three years in office I've toured dozens of farms across our large district, and enjoyed my visits locally at Forrence Orchards and Everett Orchard in Peru, The Essex Institute, Greenwood Dairy in Canton, and annual visits to the Clinton County Fair. And last November, I proudly hosted Secretary Sonny Perdue for a visit to our district -- an important opportunity to ensure our district has a seat at the table for policies in the Trump Administration.

Through meetings and discussions with our dairy farmers, I have gained an in-depth understanding of the many challenges faced by these hard-working families, and I will continue to work with my colleagues in Congress as we resolve these issues. My top priorities are to address the low price of milk and the failed MPP program, the agriculture labor crisis, and the need to increase export opportunities for our North Country Ag products.

As a Member of the Congressional Dairy Caucus, I was pleased to support the Bipartisan Budget Act that was recently signed into law. This budget included several important reforms that will help our North Country dairy producers that I wanted to update you on.

Throughout my visits with dairy farmers, one of the recurring complaints I hear is about the failing Margin Protection Program (MPP). The Margin Protection Program has failed the Northeast's dairy producers and is not working as intended. This program has not provided the returns many had anticipated and as a result, farmers in the North Country have opted out of this program.

This budget included many reforms to this flawed program, including:

- *• Raising the catastrophic coverage level from \$4.00 to \$5.00 for the first tier of covered production for ALL dairy farmers.

- *• Adjusting the first tier of covered production to include every dairy farmer's first five million pounds of annual milk production, instead of four million pounds, in response to growth across the country.

- *• Reducing premium rates, effective immediately, for every producer's first five million pounds of production, to better enable dairy farmers to afford higher levels of coverage that will provide more useful protection against low margins.

- *• Modifying the margin calculation to a monthly (from bi-monthly) basis, to make the program more accurate and responsive to producers in difficult months.

- *• Waiving the annual \$100 administrative fees for underserved farmers.

- *• Directing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to immediately reopen the program signup for 2018.

This budget also removed the \$20 million annual cap on all livestock insurance, including the Livestock Gross Margin-Dairy program, which will allow the USDA more flexibility to develop additional risk management tools for dairy producers that can complement the MPP.

Additionally, I've introduced legislation that aims to help our dairy farmers address labor shortages. For those unable to find local workers it is essential that our agricultural visa programs work as they were intended, and that's why I am leading the effort to modernize these programs, including the failing H-2A visa program.

My bill -- the Family Farm Relief Act -- would move the H-2A Agricultural Visa program from the Department of Labor to the Department of Agriculture to better meet the unique labor needs of farmers and agricultural businesses. The H-2A guest visa program has been prone to excessive delays and is too rigid to fit the changing

needs of both farmers and their employees. This bill takes practical measures to reform the system, such as allowing visa applicants to fill out applications on paper or online, requiring a user-friendly online system, and ending burdensome requirements on advertising and prevailing practice surveys.

I have also cosponsored the Dairy PRIDE Act which prohibits non-dairy beverages from being called milk. For too long, the producers of non-dairy beverages such as almond and soy product have unfairly benefited from the ability to label their products as milk. We know the unique benefits dairy milk provides to our health and I am committed to stopping these unfair marketing practices. I continue to work in Congress to gain support for these important bills and hope to see them passed and signed into law.

Looking forward, Congress is beginning the process of writing the next farm bill and one of my key goals is to fix the MPP. I also want to ensure that our specialty crop producers have the resources and support they need to continue making the North Country a leader in apple and maple production. My offices are speaking to farmers across our district now to hear your priorities, and I hope you will contact me to share yours as well.

These are challenging times for our dairy farmers and I know that you are hurting. We are working to find ways to increase markets, roll back burdensome regulation, increase access to affordable labor, and fix a MPP system that is terribly broken. Thank you to all of our farmers for all you do to keep food on our tables.