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Testifying on Behalf of:



Testimony before the House Agriculture Committee

Costs and Impacts of Mandatory Biotech Labeling Laws

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Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and other members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the costs and impacts of mandatory biotech labeling laws. Today I am here on behalf of Agri-Mark Dairy Cooperative, the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives and the National Milk Producers Federation.

My husband and I have a small 50-cow dairy located in northeast Vermont. We also grow extra hay to sell, raise Jersey steers to process and sell beef locally, and market a small amount of composted manure. We rent the farm started by my husband's grandfather, from his aunt and uncle, and it consists of over 200 acres of tillable land, including roughly 50 acres of pasture where we graze our herd in temperate months. We also raise all of our own young stock or replacement heifers. We have two young boys, ages three and two.

Along with being an active partner on the farm, I have a full-time job with a Farm Credit Association as a business consultant, serve as first vice president of our county Farm Bureau and as a dairy cattle judge for various youth and 4-H dairy shows across New England. I did not grow up on a farm but got involved in agriculture through a 4-H dairy project as a young girl in 1989. Since then, I have not let go of my Jersey cows. I boarded my animals on neighboring farms and as fate would have it met a dairy farmer who I would eventually settle down with, bringing my Jerseys along. I have a bachelor's degree from Cornell University where I focused on agri-business management and a master's in business administration from the F.W. Olin School of Business at Babson College.

My husband and I are both proud to be first-generation dairy farmers. Starting out on our own in building our farm has required a lot of hard work and at times has been tremendously challenging. Being able to raise our young sons in a farming lifestyle, and living out our dreams of caring for his family's land and our animals while producing food for our neighbors and community, though, has been hugely rewarding.

As we have started out, our overall focus is building a farm that is sustainable—one that is not just productive and profitable today but one that we can pass on to our sons 25 years down the road. They are a daily reminder of the importance of sustainability. That is why we have diversified and started our direct farm sales; and that also is why we fully embrace using technology to farm better and with less impact on our surroundings.

Farming with a backdrop of rolling green pastures edged with woods and wedged between a mountain and a lake in a small New England town sometimes comes with preconceived notions. Often it seems people think that our farm is like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. And indeed, passers-by have mistaken us for an organic dairy farm. Yet, we are a conventional operation and we believe that using tools such as biotech crops helps us to farm sustainably.

Biotechnology crops are essential to feeding our cows and calves. When we can, we pasture feed our livestock. But as the past two months have shown, harsh New England weather can make

this impossible in winter and early spring. So during those months, we feed cows and calves grass that we have processed into hay or grass silage. Additionally, throughout the year we rely on both corn and soy based feeds to complete a total mixed ration that makes the best use of our grass by balancing the needs of our cattle with the nutrients our forages provide and filling in what is missing.

This gives us a unique perspective on the importance of biotechnology. I believe that biotech varieties improve efficiency and productivity of farming. I also believe that biotechnology enables us to lessen the environmental impact that growing can have because less fertilizer and pesticides are used to grow an abundant crop.

The use of biotechnology on our farm is also important to the economic sustainability of our small business. In speaking with our dairy nutritionist, he pointed out that the only non-GMO feed he could get us right now was organic. There simply is no non-GMO grain available to us, or the freight cost would be so prohibitive it's not a real option. Thus, an organic basic 20 percent protein complete feed would cost \$750 per ton; the same conventional feed is currently \$333 per ton. On our small farm, we purchase about 16 tons of grain per month. So, using 16 tons, that would more than double our grain bill, or in hard numbers we would spend \$5,328 per month for regular feed or \$12,000 per month on organic feed—a difference of \$6,672 a month or \$80,064 per year. I do not see how we could profitably farm in the long term with those increased feed costs. It is important to note that we choose to not be organic for several reasons and thus would not receive an organic premium for our milk even if we used the organic grain mix simply to feed a non-GMO feed.

As a small farm just starting out, we are constantly exploring new opportunities to grow our business. One of the things we have been looking at recently is growing our own corn and alfalfa. Given our location, we will need shorter-day corn varieties, meaning it would grow in less time than average. Here again, we would want the choice of the best seed regardless of breeding technology; genetic engineering offers the best options. Economically it makes the best sense. Incidentally, over 97 percent of the corn grown for silage in Vermont is biotech crop.

We face a challenge brought on by what many in agriculture see as the spread of misinformation about modern agricultural practices, creating the potential for limiting our ability to use biotechnology in order to best utilize the resources we have in sustainable ways. In many cases, this has already happened as we saw with the controversy over the use of recombinant Bovine Somatotropin (rBST), a technology that has no adverse effects on human health but was rejected by some consumers for no sound scientific reason. While many said that rBST was an example of the evils of “big agriculture,” the truth is that many small dairy farms used rBST as a way to improve and grow their businesses, better utilizing existing resources including land base and without needing more capital expenditures. Now, driven by the marketplace, our cooperative

generally must restrict its members from using rBST. Thus, that option has effectively been taken away from us.

Now the agriculture industry is facing increased scrutiny for its use of biotechnology—a technology that has enabled farmers to increase yields while reducing the use of land, pesticides, fertilizers, water, and even fuel. Despite the fact that there is no credible study of biotech crops that has found them unsafe for human and animal consumption, some special interest groups are still choosing to spread misinformation, reject the technology and demand it be labeled on food products.

I welcome consumers who want to know more about how their food is produced—they have a right to know that the meals they serve at the family dining table every night is safe and nutritious. But a very small percentage of the population should not be able to impose their personal, non-science-based food preferences on the rest of us—prompting food prices to increase and driving farms like mine out of business.

Certainly, as a dairy farmer, increasing food and feed costs would have a devastating impact on my business. Beyond our farm gate, though, we know the impact would be just as brutal. Rural northeast Vermont, like many rural areas around the country, has a lot of good people who put in a hard day's work but are just barely getting by as best they can. This means that, for instance, 80 percent of the children in our elementary school receive free or reduced school lunches. It is their families who would suffer the most from price increases caused by mandatory biotech labeling – those who can least afford it.

As a mother and a consumer, I choose not to purchase organic or non-GMO food at the store. I will support my local community, however, and may purchase organic or non-GMO food at a farmers' market or directly at a farm stand. I generally do not believe in paying the higher premium for these foods because they provide no added nutritional or health benefits. With a growing family and a growing farm business, we have a lot of other places to spend our hard-earned money. Furthermore, I feel secure in the regulatory steps that have been taken to the food produced and available for sale in the grocery store to ensure it is safe to feed my family.

The fact is that American farmers offer consumers more food choices, while providing the safest food supply than any other time in our nation's history. Of course, living and working on a farm and being exposed to farm publications and reports, my view on how food is grown is different than that of a typical mom. There is information out there for those who are interested. It's just a matter of getting it from reliable sources. Some food companies are voluntarily labeling their products, some participate in the transparent USDA Certified Organic program and still some use third-party verification and a "Non-GMO" label.

Moreover, I feel even better knowing that food produced with biotechnology or biotech ingredients has been done so with some sort of advantage in mind – whether it's environmental,

health or otherwise. I certainly do not believe a mandatory biotech label is necessary; in fact I think there are more responsible ways to spend [my] taxpayer monies. Be that as it is, if consumers are to drive some sort of label requirement I believe it should be done in a cohesive way at the federal level.

You must be aware that recently my state, the state of Vermont, passed a mandatory GMO-labeling law. As you can guess, there has been a fair amount of chatter about it. I am frustrated with it. I believe that there are better uses of the state's time, and taxpayer resources, than imposing regulations on a technology that has been used and proven safe for over two decades. I am also concerned about the impact this law will have on the cost and availability of food in Vermont's grocery stores.

I might also add that in New England, states are very close and it is very easy and often more convenient at times to cross borders for various reasons. Our farm, for example, is not too far from the border with New Hampshire; we can get there in an hour. If the Vermont labeling law is activated, there will likely be one label on food in Vermont, and another on the exact same products in New Hampshire and the rest of the country raising questions about whether or not the product is actually the same. This serves no one's interests—not consumers, not farmers, not food producers.

Further, our close-knit surrounding states are considering their own GMO-labeling bills. Currently, the Vermont law exempts meat and dairy from being labeled. Others may not exempt those products. As I sell my Jersey beef, processed at a USDA certified facility, to people in other states, this may directly affect my product and my ability to market it.

In all of this, I think that it is so important for there to be an ongoing conversation with consumers about this topic. Too many times, farmers feel like they just need to tell their stories better and to "educate"; while this is part of it, I think that we also need to do a better job of listening to consumers, to their questions and concerns and addressing them.

I volunteer for an online effort called Ask the Farmers. It is a collaborative resource made up of farmers from all across the country and Canada; and from all different aspects of farming – animal ag, biotech crops, organic, conventional, small, large, etc. I'm very excited to help in an effort to put more good information out there – be it for genetic engineering, dairy farming, animal welfare, balancing life with work, farm or family. I am happy to continue to speak up for our right to farm in the best way we know possible; which in our case includes biotechnology.

I will continue to pursue an active presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as more traditional communication routes via newspapers, church meetings or everyday conversation, sharing articles and ideas along with my knowledge about the opportunities and challenges we face as modern-day farmers and parents. If I have one person or ten people reach out to me for a

question or appreciating my hands-on and practical perspective from the farm, then I have succeeded. And I have.

I may add that I testified at a subcommittee hearing on this very topic last summer and received some rude comments from total strangers on social media. I tried to start a conversation with those folks who were interested in having one and ignored those who were more interested in making personal comments and being bullies. It was not always the most pleasant experience, but being a dairy farmer I'm used to having to do dirty jobs from time to time. But even with those negative encounters, or maybe because of them, I was eager to come back to share my experiences with all of the members of the Committee.

I personally believe that there is room for many different styles of responsible farming—the freedom to operate your business or organize your life as you see fit is one of the things that makes America great and our economy strong. I also believe that biotechnology plays a major role in our collective ability to not only feed a growing global population, but to also make individual improvements on our own farms be it 50 cows or 5,000 cows; a cash crop operation or an apple orchard; a multiple-generation farm or a beginning farmer. Even though less than two percent of the U.S. population now lives on farms or is actively involved in farming, agriculture comes in all different sizes and shapes and we need every one of them. Just as importantly, we give consumers options when they go to the grocery store.

We know more now than we have ever have about growing food, or caring for animals, and this helps us to achieve a level of productivity that previous generations of farmers would envy. I am proud of how far the American farmer has come, just as I am proud of how far we have come on our own farm.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and to share my experience with biotechnology.

### **About Agri-Mark**

Agri-Mark, with more than a billion dollars in 2014 sales, markets more than 300 million gallons of farm fresh milk each year for about 1,200 dairy farm families in New England and New York. The cooperative is headquartered in Methuen, Mass., has been marketing milk for dairy farmers since 1913, and actively represents their legislative interests in the Northeast and in Washington, D.C.

### **About the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives**

Since 1929, NCFC has been the voice of America's farmer cooperatives. NCFC values farmer ownership and control in the production and distribution chain; the economic viability of farmers and the businesses they own; and vibrant rural communities. We have an extremely diverse

membership, which we view as one of our sources of strength—our members span the country, supply nearly every agricultural input imaginable, provide credit and related financial services (including export financing), and market a wide range of commodities and value-added products.

American agriculture is a modern-day success story. America's farmers produce the world's safest, most abundant food supply for consumers at prices far lower than the world average. Farmer cooperatives are an important part of the success of American agriculture. Cooperatives differ from other businesses because they are member-owned and are operated for the shared benefit of their members.

Farmer cooperatives enhance competition in the agricultural marketplace by acting as bargaining agents for their member's products; providing market intelligence and pricing information; providing competitively priced farming supplies; and vertically integrating their members' production and processing. There are over 3,000 farmer cooperatives across the U.S., and earnings from their activities (known as patronage) are returned to their farmer members, helping improve their members' income from the marketplace.

#### **About the National Milk Producers Federation**

The National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF), based in Arlington, Va., develops and carries out policies that advance the well-being of U.S. dairy producers and the cooperatives they collectively own. The members of NMPF's cooperatives produce the majority of the U.S. milk supply, making NMPF the voice of nearly 32,000 dairy producers on Capitol Hill and with government agencies. For more on NMPF's activities, visit [www.nmpf.org](http://www.nmpf.org).