

Whole Milk Hearing, Senate Majority Policy Committee, June 16, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Scavello and the Committee for inviting testimony on the issue of whole milk choice in schools. I appreciate this opportunity.

My name is Mike Eby. I am a lifelong Lancaster County farmer. Our farm near Gordonville has been in my family for over 200 years.

I serve on the board of the Pennsylvania Farmers Union. At the national level, I serve as chairman of the National Dairy Producers Organization, and I am also the executive director of the Organization for Competitive Markets.

In my many interactions with other farmers and consumers, having done many outreach programs through my industry involvements, I see the divide that keeps farmers and consumers apart -- on knowledge, markets, fairness and choice. The issue of allowing children to choose whole milk at school is one that seems to escape the application of logic, freedom and fairness.

Whole milk is the choice more people are making today at home for their families, as they see the research showing the nutritional benefits and see that their children prefer it. I know the organizations I represent are appreciative of the efforts of U.S. Congressmen G.T. Thompson and Fred Keller for their efforts on this at the federal level.

Dairy farmers have lost a generation of milk drinkers since whole milk was removed from schools in 2010. This has really affected Pennsylvania. Our state has a significant stake in the impact on farms, allied businesses, jobs and revenue. Our state also has an interest in terms of children being able to choose milk they will drink, to actually receive the nutrition, considering they eat one or two meals a day at school.

The umbrella on this is the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. I have watched the DGA process over the past 10 years. The most recent cycle drew tens of thousands of comments, many questioning why many scientific studies on dietary fat were left out of the process.

After the 2015 DGA cycle, Congress asked the Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to review the process. In 2017, the Academy issued a report citing the need for “enhanced transparency and stronger scientific rigor.” The Nutrition Coalition reported that despite protests by public health groups, thousands of individuals, including hundreds of doctors, the DGA committee again ignored or excluded large bodies of scientific literature on the role of fats in the diet.

Dairy checkoff promotions that farmers must pay into are affected by these guidelines that the industry heartily applauds when they are released. Checkoff funding of fat-free and low-fat promotion includes innovations that are now blending low-fat milk with almond beverage and

ultrafiltration that allows milk solids to move anywhere and be reconstituted in beverages – coca cola-style.

Meanwhile, the low fat rules turn children away from milk to other drinks in a beverage market dominated by huge global companies. These drinks do not come close to providing the nutrition of whole milk.

Fresh whole milk is the most locally-produced product in the dairy sector. It is also the class that brings a higher value to farmers in a regional blend price.

In a milk pricing system that can be inequitable, “price discovery” in the valuation of components is important as the foundation of a producer’s milk check. When milk fat is treated as a byproduct, it can be undervalued as a component.

If school children had the choice of whole milk, future generations of milk drinkers would not be lost, and new market and processing opportunities could result for dairy farms right here in Pennsylvania.

The overall despair that I am seeing among dairy farmers, is the feeling they’ve got nowhere to turn legislatively or through their cooperatives for any hope of speaking up on their behalf.

Being heard on an issue as simple as whole milk choice in schools -- and seeing progress on this issue -- would give a lot of dairy farmers hope.

The 97 MILK effort, sharing facts on whole milk, has opened a lot of people’s eyes. But if children continue to be prevented from choosing whole milk at school, and most people don’t even know this is happening, and producers’ own organizations don’t step up to make people aware -- where do dairy farmers turn?

I hope you will consider action that can bring the choice of whole milk back to Pennsylvania school children and hope back to Pennsylvania dairy farms.