



517 VALE WOOD ROAD, LORETTO, PENNSYLVANIA 15940

Telephone: (814) 886-7171 • 1-800-861-6455

**Testimony for Agricultural Listening Session**  
**Senator John Wozniak and Senator John Eichelberger**

**April 13, 2007**

Good afternoon and thank you for your interest in agricultural issues and concerns.

I am Carissa Itle Westrick, part of the fourth generation of family ownership of Vale Wood Farms.

Vale Wood Farms is a family dairy operation in nearby Loretto, Pennsylvania. We grow the crops to feed our own herd of cows, and then process their milk into our own line of dairy products.

We are a local dairy producer and processor. At our dairy farm, we milk 200 cows and then buy milk from 3 other family farms. About 400 cows supply our entire dairy. We sell our milk and all-natural dairy products to local homes, stores, schools, and institutions within about an hour radius of our farm. We have 35 full-time employees and an additional 15 part-time staff.

Thank you for arranging this listening session. To our family, it signifies that you recognize the importance of local farmers in providing local consumers with quality food products. We're glad that you remember that there are many rural areas between Altoona and Johnstown. Farms are essential to our local, mostly rural economies. We support local companies- from our feed and equipment purchases to our office supply and graphic needs, our farm creates employment beyond our country lane.

**Issues of importance to our dairy farming business:**

- 1) **Feed and fuel costs.** The rising milk markets are getting some media attention lately, and normally, after the low milk prices of 2006, rising milk prices would be welcome relief. However, we're in uncharted territory regarding our feed costs. Due to ethanol pressures on the corn crop, corn is trading at historic highs, which is causing other feed alternatives to move higher as well. Like most dairy farmers, we will be working through our feed rations to determine cost efficiencies, but rising feed and fuel costs are poised to be the top concern for 2007 for most of animal agriculture. Please help to communicate the seriousness of this financial situation in the countryside.
- 2) **Health insurance costs.** As an employer, we offer comprehensive health insurance coverage to our full time staff. Each year, our costs climb an average of 10%, and have forced us to take measures such as increasing co-pays and narrowing the scope of our benefits package. Farmers are unable to increase the cost of our products in order to cover insurance cost increases. Farm families and all Pennsylvanians need assistance in controlling health care costs.

- 3) **Taxes and other business issues.** We support property tax reform as well as elimination of the state inheritance tax due to the negative impacts on farmers- whose balance sheets reflect land and asset value and not cash income. Additionally, the recent stepped increase to the state minimum wage impacts our ability to provide competitive compensation to our farm employees. The overwhelming theme to my comments is that any increased costs to doing business doesn't just impact large faceless corporate interests, it impacts farm businesses as well.
- 4) **Conservation funding.** Our family farm is absolutely committed to protecting and preserving our natural and wildlife resources. Farmers need technical and financial assistance to address environmental regulations and conservation projects. We work very closely with our Conservation District and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices and can't say enough about the staff's excellent level of technical ability and their commitment to providing farmers with conservation assistance.
- 5) **Availability of low-interest loans and grants for agriculture.** We appreciate the Pennsylvania First Industries Fund and the program's commitment to funding agricultural projects. We also support the state bill that would provide grants for schools to take educational fieldtrips to visit farms.
- 6) **Local food.** We appreciate everything that you do to support your constituent farmers because we must assure that consumers can have a choice of fresh, local food at the grocery store. Increasingly, there is an awareness that organic milk processed out-of-state and shipped refrigerated for hundreds of miles may have more negative environmental impacts than naturally-produced milk from a local farmer. We support all efforts to capitalize on this growing consumer awareness of food origin and quality in order to promote Pennsylvania agriculture.
- 7) **Encouraging the Farming tradition.** My husband and I left big city careers behind to move home and commit to my family's farming business. Beyond the agricultural community, I worry about the continued exodus of our talented, educated residents in search of professional employment. By and large, the friends that I have remaining in this area are those whose families have ties to the land and to our farming tradition. I support any efforts to encourage young, educated Pennsylvanians to keep our state's farming tradition thriving.

In May, our farm will welcome almost 2,000 school visitors for our "From Moo to You" educational tours. I would like to extend a welcome to Senator Wozniak and Senator Eichelberger and your staffs to join us for a tour of our family dairy farm business.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and to communicate the challenges facing your constituent family farmers.