

WASHINGTON (Friday, Nov. 9) - The three members of the Vermont Congressional Delegation -- Sen. Patrick Leahy (D), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I) and Rep. Peter Welch (D) -- are pushing back against a new Bush Administration veto threat against expansion of the MILC program, the basic safety net for dairy farmers when prices plummet. The Administration included its objections to expanding the MILC program in a new veto warning message lodged this week against the Senate's version of the Farm Bill.

The Senate began debating a new five-year Farm Bill this week and continues work on the bill next week. The Bush Administration's new "Statement of Administration Policy" (SAP) on the Senate's Farm Bill includes the following objections to the MILC program provisions in the Senate bill: "The bill also increases the payment rate for the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program and increases the quantity of milk that is eligible to receive MILC payments. These increases likewise do not signify reform, result in more market distorting policy, and increase government costs."

Leahy, the Senate Agriculture Committee member with the most seniority and a former chairman of the panel, authored and included the extension and expansion of the MILC program in the Senate's Farm Bill. Sanders and Welch have worked with Leahy in forging bipartisan Senate and House coalitions in support of extending the MILC program. The House-passed version of the Farm Bill includes an extension but not also an expansion of the MILC program.

Leahy said, "The Bush Administration is not letting up in their assault on dairy farmers," said Leahy. "They opposed our Dairy Compact, and they have dug in their heels about strengthening the MILC program. Dairy farmers are only a market cycle away from hard times that can drive them off the land and out of business. It is unconscionable that President Bush now wants to undercut the safety net that stands between dairy farmers and ruinous downturns in their hard-earned income."

Sanders said, "Once again, the White House is putting its far-right ideology ahead of the needs of the country. In this case, the President's irresponsible promised veto will hurt family farmers, hungry children, and the environment. While this Farm Bill is not everything that I would want, it makes needed improvements in our nutrition programs, extends and improves the MILC program that is so important to family dairy farmers, and it puts additional emphasis on conservation and renewable biofuels. Americans said very clearly last November that they want change. President Bush should honor the wishes of the American people and withdraw his veto

threat. The Bush Administration seems to have no trouble finding money to pay for the war in Iraq and tax cuts for the wealthy, but somehow there's just not enough money for hungry children."

Welch said, "The President is once again demonstrating his reckless and out-of-touch priorities. We are working hard to assure fairer milk prices, cut commodity payments for wealthy Western farmers, support farm-to-school programs, and fund food stamps. President Bush is yet again a roadblock to progress."

The 2007 Senate Farm Bill would extend the MILC program for the life of the bill, 2008 to 2012, while expanding the program in two ways that are especially important to Vermont dairy producers. Leahy made this possible earlier this year by pushing through a funding baseline for an extension of the MILC program. The Senate Farm Bill would raise the payment percentage under the program, and it would expand program eligibility to fully cover about 90 percent of dairy farmers. The bill also includes a wide variety of other Vermont priorities, including more support for farmers who want to make the transition to organic production, added help for the cleanup of Lake Champlain through conservation assistance partnerships with farmers, and more resources for anti-hunger programs like the Vermont Food Bank.

A summary of Vermont highlights in the Senate Farm Bill is available on the Leahy website at:

<http://leahy.senate.gov/press/200710/102407a.html>