

[Terri Hallenbeck, Free Press](#)

Beth Kennett and her family refinanced their Rochester farm last week, optimistic that changes will be made to the nation's milk-pricing system to make the farm's future more promising.

Kennett said she hopes those changes will come about through legislation Vermont Sens. Bernie Sanders and Patrick Leahy introduced Monday at a barn-side news conference at the Belter's Ethan Allen Farm in South Burlington, within earshot of the airport where they would later catch a flight to Washington.

The legislation, also sponsored in the House by Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., would charge farmers a payment if they produce more than a set amount of milk, Sanders said. That money would be distributed to farmers who stay within their allowable growth rate. It's designed to keep supply aligned more closely with demand and to keep milk prices from fluctuating wildly with spikes in supply, Sanders said.

"This price volatility has been devastating to Vermont farmers," Sanders, an independent, said at the news conference, alongside Leahy, a Democrat, and Vermont Agriculture Secretary Roger Allbee. A 2 percent to 3 percent increase in milk production over demand can cause prices to plummet 20 percent to 30 percent, Allbee said, creating a volatility that's driving small Vermont farms out of business.

The trio and a broad selection of Vermont farmers said they support attacking the crisis in dairy farming by going after supply management.

"You've got to align supply and demand," said Bob Wellington, senior vice president of Agri-Mark, a New England dairy cooperative, who has worked on the legislation.

Forty years ago, there were 40 farms in the valley near their Liberty Hill Farm, Kennett said, but today theirs is the only one. Larger farms in the Midwest and South, which have lower

production costs, drive down the price farmers are paid for milk by increasing production, she said, putting small New England farms at risk.

"There has to be a change," Kennett said.

Change in dairy pricing never comes without support from large-farm states, which usually is hard to come by. Supply-management efforts face opposition from large dairy organizations nationally. Leahy and Sanders said they see a shift in interest, however. A member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Leahy said he planned to meet with key Midwestern senators later in the day.

A spokesman for committee Chairman Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, did not return a call seeking comment on the legislation's prospects.

Just having Leahy on board is a big milestone, said Margaret Laggis, a Vermont farm lobbyist. The senator usually is reluctant to back such efforts until he sees it has a chance, she said, and his position as the second-most senior senator should help.

Amanda St. Pierre, a Berkshire dairy farmer with 1,500 milkers, has been working on the legislation for several years with a group called Dairy Farmers Working Together. They gathered in Sheldon in 2006, then in Wisconsin last year. At another meeting next week in Chicago, various groups will work to tweak the legislation in hopes of winning more support, she said.

Each step has marked progress, she said. Last year in Wisconsin, she said, she was pleasantly surprised by the willingness of Midwest farmers to consider supply management. "We went out there thinking they wouldn't talk to us," she said. "They know they need to get involved."

"Let's be clear," Sanders said. "It ain't gonna be easy, but I think we've got a shot."

