Rutland Herald Editorial

The paradox of dairy farming in Vermont and around the country is that there are fewer farms but there is too much milk.

One of the consequences of excessive production is low prices, and in recent years prices have plunged so low that fewer and fewer farms have been able to stay in business. To halt destructive swings in the milk price Sen. Bernard Sanders has introduced a bill, cosponsored by Sen. Patrick Leahy to create a new system that would curb the milk surplus and support the price farmers receive. Rep. Peter Welch has introduced a similar bill in the House.

Low prices are a major reason that the number of dairy farms in Vermont has fallen by half in the last 15 years. There are now only 1,000 farms, and agriculture officials fear that another 200 could be lost.

Milk is still plentiful even as the number of farms has fallen by half because of farm consolidations and because of the growth of corporate mega-farms, particularly in states such as California, Texas and Idaho. Breeding and technology have also boosted production. One hundred cows produce much more milk today than they did 50 years ago.

Vermont does not have the kind of giant farms that exist out west, but even here concentration has allowed some farms to add hundreds of cows, primarily in the dairy heartland of Addison and Franklin counties. Meanwhile, operations in more marginal areas have dwindled. An Associated Press story quoted the owner of the last remaining farm in Rochester, a town that had 40 farms 40 years ago. Her sons want to continue farming, and she hopes the new legislation will help secure a price that will allow them to do so.

Farm policy ought to do more than promote production. If that were the sole aim, the government might continue to promote policies boosting factory farms, which enjoy advantageous economies of scale.

But regions such as Vermont also have an interest in promoting local farms, smaller in scale, both as a way to maintain an open working landscape, to preserve a rural way of life, and to ensure a wholesome fresh product that originates close to home. Thus, farm policy ought to focus on ways to keep small- and medium-sized operations in business. The supply management bill proposed by Sanders, Leahy and Welch could discourage the ballooning production caused by big operators, which contributes to surpluses that drive down the price, squeezing smaller farms.

And yet legislative prospects for the new bill would have to be considered iffy at best. Farm legislation is always subject to the clash of regional interests. The Vermont Farm Bureau, an organization reflecting mainstream farm opinion, supports the new bill after years of opposing previous supply management schemes. No doubt, they see the handwriting on the wall.

But the Farm Bureau in Wisconsin, which has 13 times the number of dairy farms as Vermont, opposes the bill. Dairy farmers have long been wary of programs that would remove as an option the choice of putting on more cows in order to boost income. The National Milk Producers Federation also opposes the bill. It is likely that voice of major corporate operators is heard within the federation.

Members of Congress pushing the interests of farm groups in their regions must always contend with competing interests. Midwestern dairy farmers have traditionally opposed measures such as the Northeast Dairy Compact, which was designed to compensate for the advantages of scale enjoyed in the Midwest. Legislative success is usually the product of shrewd horse-trading.

In the meantime, more Vermont farmers have turned to organic dairy farming in order to benefit from significantly higher prices, though the number of organic farmers remains relatively small. Until policies benefiting corporate agriculture are changed, Vermont farmers will have to continue their struggle for survival, and the supply management proposal offered by the congressional delegation is one of a dwindling number of arrows in their quiver.