

By Jessica Forand

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt. on Friday asked area farmers here for their support as work continues to pass the federal Farm Bill.

The farm bill, which comes up for reauthorization every five years, passed in the U.S. Senate last week and is now up for what Welch sees as hot debate in the House.

With Ralph McNall, St. Albans Cooperative Creamery board president, at his side, Welch said he needed "all hands on deck."

Welch spoke for about an hour with a handful of dairy stakeholders at the American Legion Hall, telling them it was time for "hand-to-hand" combat with those in Congress who want to cut key industry provisions.

The Farm Bill includes new dairy provisions to replace the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC), which compensates producers when domestic milk prices fall below a specified level.

The new bill creates a federally subsidized margin insurance program. A "market management" provision would discourage over-supply of milk.

Economists have identified a three-year cycle for milk prices, stemming from small shifts in the supply of milk. When there is an abundance of milk, prices have fallen precipitously, dropping well below the cost of production in 2009. In the current downturn, prices have not fallen quite so far as they did three years ago. The May statistical uniform price for milk sold in Suffolk, Mass. was at \$16.79 per hundredweight.

The market management program in the Farm Bill is intended to reduce the severity of the milk

price cycle.

This new bill provisions, by some projections, could reduce the federal deficit by \$23 billion through spending cuts and efficiencies.

The bill includes a number of other agriculture-related provisions, including conservation. In the Senate version, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D.-Vt. led the defense of Forest Legacy Program, which would assure the conservation of more than 2.2 million acres of working forest lands in 49 states. An amendment eliminating the program had been proposed.

Also included were the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which helped farmers prevent agricultural runoff, as well as the Community Forest and Open Space Program, which preserves threatened forestland, and crop insurance provisions for organic crops, and nutrition assistance for the poor.

While Welch said the Senate was able to protect a nutrition provision in the bill, he said House Republicans have expressed support for a reduction in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as food stamps.

Leahy helped to defeat Republican efforts to reduce SNAP benefits in the Senate.

In order to get the bill passed in the House, Welch encouraged Vermont farmers to reach out to his colleagues serving in other states, particularly those whose representatives remain opposed to the bill. New England's House members, for the most part, are on board, he said.

McNall and co-op creamery CEO Leon Berthiaume recommended that Welch offer names of those for contact, so a grassroots networking system could begin.

Rep. David Scott, is one such important contact, said Welch. He added that he had been thus far unable to be persuaded the Georgia Democrat to support the bill.

House Speaker John Boehner, R.-Ohio, has spoken out against the bill as currently written. Reacting to that at Friday's meeting here, Agri-Mark dairy economist Bob Wellington said he would rather have the speaker talk openly rather than make a closed-door deal.

Clark Hinsdale, Vermont's Farm Bureau president, said the 50 state bureau presidents would meet in July and that further support would be sought at that session.

Hinsdale advised that House representatives serving urban centers should not be forgotten in the effort to find as many votes as possible. He said the bill also offers protections to consumers.

Roger Rainville, an Alburgh farmer, said the bill would affect all U.S. citizens, because all are either producers or consumers. "Who doesn't have a stake in this?" he asked

Hinsdale said that action on the 2012 Farm Bill may be in its eleventh hour, but much can change between 11:59 and midnight. "We're at that stage where it's kind of a street fight," he said.

Harold Howrigan, Jr., of Fairfield, who was recently appointed to the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board, said stabilization of farm prices was the most necessary bit in the bill. Farmers couldn't live without it, he added, saying that defeat would mean "we're going to be swimming in milk."

At the end of the meeting, Welch asked for a show of hands, which revealed total support for the Senate version of the bill, including its nutrition program provisions.