

[By Kathryn Flagg, Addison County Independent](#)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture late last week announced that emergency aid payments, approved by federal lawmakers earlier this fall, will soon be on their way to struggling dairy farmers.

The new Dairy Economic Loss Assistance Payment (DELAP) program will distribute \$290 million to dairy farmers across the country. The funding is part of a \$350 million dairy assistance measure Congress approved in October at the request of Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

The \$290 million will be doled out in direct payments to farmers. An average Vermont dairy farmer milking 125 cows will receive roughly \$8,000 in aid through this program. In addition to these direct payments, \$60 million was set aside to underwrite the nationwide purchase of cheese for food banks and nutrition programs.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said the news that the DELAP payments will soon be on their way to farmers is "absolutely wonderful, especially coming at Christmas."

"It is going to mean a lot to dairy farmers throughout the state who have suffered through the worst year that dairy farmers have had in 40 years," Sanders said.

But Welch and Sanders both agreed with farmers who have voiced concerns that these aid payments — which in some cases represent a tiny fraction of the amount of debt a farmer has taken out to stay in business — are a small step toward solving a larger problem.

"This is a Band-Aid," Welch said. "It's a necessary Band-Aid, it's a helpful Band-Aid, but it's not the change we need. (Farmers) need a stable, sustainable price that meets the cost of production."

Sanders was similarly realistic about the aid.

"Nobody has any illusions that this is going to solve the crisis that dairy farmers are facing," Sanders said.

The next step, both lawmakers agreed, is to work toward a long-term solution that would remove volatility from the dairy pricing system. Sanders feels the industry needs to move toward a supply management system, eliminating the huge surpluses of milk on the market that drive down prices.

But taking that next step, Sanders said, hinges on farmers coming to Washington under a united front. Federal lawmakers likely won't be making any big changes until farmers reach a consensus about how to move forward, he said.

"It is absolutely clear that we need a long-term solution to prevent the kind of price volatility that we have seen for so many years. That is why, as we speak, we're working with dairy farmers in Vermont and around the country, we're working with co-ops, we're working with farm organizations to try to bring some consensus to the family-based dairy farm industry as to how we go forward long term," Sanders said.

Welch, for one, dismissed concerns that ensuring a fair price for farmers would mean driving up costs to consumers.

"Frankly, it's deeper than that," Welch said, pointing out that current farm policy puts in place supports for crops like sugar that keep prices artificially low. "We should have a farm policy that's focused on nutritional food for the consumer, local production for the environment, and sustainable prices for the farmer."

Meanwhile, in Vermont, Agriculture Secretary Roger Albee welcomed the news of the emergency aid payments.

"We are very grateful for this needed assistance," Albee said in a statement. "We understand it is not the end solution and that much work needs to be done on many levels to ensure a less volatile milk pricing system so that our Vermont dairy farmers can rely on a more stable market and remain financially viable."