

Rep. Peter Welch, along with Rep. Bill Owens (D-N.Y.), introduced legislation this week to help dairy farmers meet their labor needs. The H-2A Improvement Act of 2011 (H.R. 1720) would allow dairy farmers access to the H-2A visa program, which other sectors of agriculture currently use to hire foreign workers.

"Vermont's dairy farmers are hanging on by their fingernails," Welch said. "Every day they struggle with multiple challenges to survival, including high energy costs, unstable milk prices and a shortage of workers. This legislation will help take one challenge off their plates by ensuring they have an adequate labor supply. I look forward to working with Rep. Owens and Sen. Leahy to pass this bill into law."

The H-2A visa program allows farmers to hire foreign workers when domestic labor is unavailable. H.R. 1720 would allow foreign dairy workers, shepherders and goat herders access the program. The U.S. Department of Labor issued rules in 2010 excluding the dairy industry from the H-2A agricultural worker visa program. While shepherders and goat herders currently have access to the H-2A program, H.R. 1720 would make this access permanent.

As a founder and co-chair of the Congressional Dairy Farmers Caucus and member of the House Agriculture Committee, Rep. Welch is a strong advocate for Vermont dairy farmers. He has introduced legislation that would stabilize the dairy prices for farmers and will be a key player in writing the next Farm Bill in this Congress. In the fall of 2009, Welch worked successfully with Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders to provide \$350 million in emergency

assistance to dairy farmers.

H.R. 1720 is a companion bill to S. 852, introduced in the U.S. Senate by Sen. Leahy.