



## Organic Dairy Farmers Rally in Protest

**Organic dairy farmers express their views to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack during his visit to West Salem, Wisconsin.**

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Courtesy of iStock photoA glut of organic milk, fueled by giant factory farms, threatens to wash family farmers off their land. Farmers and their advocates participated in an emergency rally July 16 in an effort to demonstrate their plight to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack.

Vilsack was in West Salem, Wis., as part of a national tour.

Under the Bush administration, the USDA was accused of "looking the other way" as large corporate agribusinesses invested in organics while allegedly violating federal standards.

In the dairy sector, there are now estimated to be 20 large industrial dairies, each milking thousands of cows, producing as much as 40 percent of the nation's organic milk supply.

"With the slowdown in the economy, the market is no longer able to absorb the growing supply of organic milk," stated Mark Kastel, senior farm policy analyst with The Cornucopia Institute. "Processors have now cut the price of milk for farmers, and imposed production caps. Many family farmers are now in danger of losing their farms."

Billed as the "Save the Organic Family Dairy Farm Rally," the event was held at La Crosse Interstate Fair in West Salem, Wis. It immediately preceded a town hall meeting on rural issues with Vilsack, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke and transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. Secretary Vilsack was invited to say a few words to the farmers prior to the town hall session.

"His acknowledgment of the dilemma that faces organic dairy producers will be a big morale boost," said Kastel before the meeting with Vilsack.

Besides The Cornucopia Institute, the emergency organic dairy rally is cosponsored by Family Farm Defenders, Center for Rural Affairs, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, Midwest Organic Dairy Producers Alliance, Church's Center for Land and People, National Family Farm Coalition and the Interfaith Program Action Council.

In addition to the serious financial losses some farmers are experiencing, two of the largest organic milk processors and handlers, Dean Foods (marketing Horizon milk) and HP Hood, which owns Kemps dairy in the Midwest (marketing Stonyfield milk) have informed some of their farmers that they will not renew their contracts. "These corporations have, in essence, signed a financial death warrant for these farmers," said Kastel.

Many organic producers borrowed tens of thousands of dollars, some well over \$100,000, to convert to organics and modernize their farms. Without contracts to sell organic milk, many of these operators face bankruptcy and risk losing the farms that have been in their families for multiple generations.

"The only way we have been able to continue in business is to cash in our retirement IRA, our life savings," says Bruce Drinkman, who milks 50 cows with his wife Mari outside of Glenwood City, Wis. "If the secretary of agriculture and others in power don't recognize our plight, soon we will lose everything."

For years, members in the organic community and the National Organic Standards Board, the expert panel set up by Congress, have appealed to the USDA to crack down on "scofflaws" bending the organic regulations on giant factory dairies, mostly in the desert-West.

"We are asking Secretary Vilsack to view this as a legitimate emergency and take immediate action, to shut down the giant farms that are violating federal organic law," Kastel added. "Otherwise many of the ethical, hard-working farmers who built this industry will be driven out of business by cheaters."

In addition to immediate enforcement action against factory farms allegedly "gaming the system," Cornucopia has asked Vilsack to request the Justice Department to look into possible antitrust violations by the nation's largest conventional and



organic milk bottler and marketer, Dean Foods.

"I intend to tell the Secretary that there has been a sweetheart relationship between Dean Foods, and other giant agribusinesses, and the USDA for too long," said John Kinsman, a LaValle, Wisconsin organic dairy farmer. "We need new management at the National Organic Program, the kind of change that President Obama promised during his campaign," Kinsman added.

While the dustup over the large factory farms producing organic milk is infuriating to many organic farmers and consumers alike, there is no shortage of organic milk that is widely perceived to meet both the letter and spirit of the organic regulations.

The Cornucopia Institute completed an in-depth study last year rating the country's 110 organic dairy brands based on their ethical approach to milk production. Nearly 90 percent of all namebrand organic dairy products were highly rated in the scorecard.

"In every market in this country, in every product category—cheese, butter, ice cream and milk—it is easy for consumers to find organic dairy products that truly meet their expectations," said Will Fantle, research director at Cornucopia. "In general, consumers can really trust the organic label. These giant corporate dairies are just bad aberrations."

Kastel says they were glad to have Secretary Vilsack come to Wisconsin, America's Dairyland, where there are more organic dairy farmers than any other state.

"We know he understands the promise of organic agriculture for rural America," Kastel says, "We just want to make sure he understands that families producing milk, conventional and organic, have their backs to the wall and desperately need his help."