

Schumer Urges Clampdown On Foreign Imports To Help Local Farms Survive

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Many of the family owned and operated farms in Oswego County have disappeared over the years.

With increasing competition from abroad, many more are facing extinction.

Senator Charles Schumer is pushing for a clampdown of foreign milk substitute imports. It could save New York's dairy farmers millions of dollars, he said Wednesday.

The senator said increased foreign imports of Milk Protein Concentrates (MPCs) from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Europe that are being used instead of dry milk could cost New York farmers not only money but, in some cases, their farms.

Imported MPCs are used in coffee creamers and snack foods and hurt New York milk farmers, Schumer said. "Processors now seek to use MPCs in all US cheese, instead of using traditional dry milk produced in New York," he said.

According to the senator's figures, that has already cost New York dairy farmers \$96.33 million. Of that total, more than 12 million comes from Central New York, he added.

"For too long our farmers have been getting hammered on all sides," Schumer said during a conference call Wednesday afternoon. "If it isn't weather problems, it's the USDA failing to enforce the support price on milk. If it isn't problems with harvests, it's free trade agreements that open up our markets to a flood of competition. Now, it's these highly subsidized MPCs that companies are using instead of New York milk in dairy products like coffee creamers and snack foods. These MPCs are foreign producers' unfair way of getting around tariffs and it's got to stop now."

Currently, foreign dairy producers are avoiding US tariffs on nonfat dry milk by instead selling MPCs to be used in products such as cheese spreads, snack foods and coffee creamers. While there is a 39 cent tariff on nonfat dry milk, there is just a 0.17 cent per pound tariff on MPCs.

By mixing small amounts of milk protein with nonfat dry milk, foreign producers in countries including New Zealand, Australia, Canada and some European countries essentially import nonfat dry milk as MPCs and avoid the tariff, according to the senator.

As a result, over the last decade, MPCs imports have more than doubled -- undermining the market for non-fat dry milk, reducing the farm price for milk, and costing New York dairy farmers millions every year, Schumer said.

To protect New York dairy farmers, Schumer urged Congress to close the MPCs loophole by passing a measure he is co-sponsoring that would apply a tariff of 71 to 98 cents per pound of MPCs depending on the protein concentration.

"Over the last decade, MPCs imports have increased by more than 600 percent, undermining the market for non-fat dry milk and costing New York dairy farmers millions of dollars every year," he said Wednesday. "Some cheese and other dairy food producers have lobbied the FDA to allow MPCs to be used in cheeses - a move that would further damage the market for New York dairy farmers."

In Central New York last year, 948 dairy farmers lost \$12.01 million due to the proliferation of cheap MPC imports, Schumer said.

In Oswego County there are 80 dairy farms; they lost \$570,000 due to MPCs imports in 2003, according to the senator's figures.

Local Reaction

"Milk prices have been coming up a little bit for dairy farmers," said Nancy Weber, who along with her husband operates a dairy farm in Oswego County. "You never know if it will keep up. It could be right back in the cellar next month."

A lot of the fluctuation has to do with the government and the war in Iraq, she noted.

"As a farmer, especially in this area, you are at the whim of so many factors," she said. "It's the weather, and it's the imports, it's so many things it'll make your head spin."

Some of the larger dairies haven't been able to buy cows from Canada because of the mad cow disease situation, she added.

The Webers have 65 cows on their farm.

She said she hopes Sen. Schumer's efforts will help the farmers.

"What we're looking for is stability," she said. "If we just made widgets we'd be in better control. But, as farmers, we're at the mercy of so many factors."

Weber said they are looking forward to a good season.

Even that doesn't guarantee financial stability, she said.

"We pour our money back into the farm if we have a real good year. If you're working for a big corporation that has a good year, you get a vacation in the Caribbean. We pay off some of our bills or buy a new tractor," she said.

Linda Clark and her husband milk 100 cows on their Oswego County farm.

"It's becoming impossible to compete," she said. "There are just too many imports all over the place. And, of course, the larger farms in the South and Midwest have a big advantage over the little family run farms here."

The weather is better in other parts of the country, she said, adding those in the South and Midwest don't have the extra expense of having a barn. The have a place to milk the cows and other than that they roam around outside, she said.

Some area farms have been selling some of their animals to survive, Clark noted.

To help pay the bills, the Clarks began selling some of their wood last year, she said.

"We survived because we sold wood. You can't go on too long losing money," she said. "We've also sold a young heifer and cows out of our herd. That enabled us to buy some new equipment and pay bills; but we're down to nothing else left to sell. If milk prices fall way down again, we're in trouble."

Clark said the farm has been in the family for generations and they've just been hanging on the last three or four years.

Farming has changed over the years, Clark said. However, they still do some things the old fashioned way. For example, she said, they still name all of their cows. Each name is unique, so they know which family line the animal came from, and everyone on the farm knows the cows' names, she said.

"There comes a certain point where no matter how much you love your animals, no matter how much you love what you're doing, you just can't go on," she said. "We're going to keep doing our best to continue. What else can we do?"