

Remarks relating to the reauthorization of the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact  
by Jan H. Reitsma, Director of the RI Department of Environmental Management,  
before the Northeast Dairy Compact Commission, May 11, 2001, Newport, Rhode Island.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to join you at this important meeting. On behalf of Governor Almond, welcome to RI and welcome to Newport. This city, this particular waterfront location, and the bridges by which you came to Aquidneck Island, give you a wonderful feel for one of our most important environmental and economic assets, Narragansett Bay. As a State, and as the State's environmental agency, we spend a lot of effort and resources on protecting this asset. In general, we spend a lot of effort on protecting RI's natural resources and on helping the people who depend on these resources for their livelihoods, people who are also the frontline stewards of these resources: our fishermen, foresters and farmers.

This is an important meeting because it is the first in a series that will address the need for reauthorization of the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact, federal legislation that is critical to the New England region, our States, our cities and towns. Critical not just to our farmers, but also our consumers, our residents and our visitors. Critical to our economy, the quality of our dairy products, and the quality of our environment.

Our quality of life has a lot to do with our open spaces and our landscapes, and one of the best ways to preserve those assets is to protect them as working landscapes. And one of the best ways to protect working farms is the dairy compact. Because it helps farmers stay in business, at a scale that is consistent with the tradition of agriculture in our region, with our regional economy, and with the character of our regional and local communities.

Loss of open space and in particular farmland is a major concern for us. Between 1964 and 1997, RI lost almost half of its farmland. We went from almost 104,000 acres to a little over 55,000. Land planted for crops and pasture declined from 45,000 to less than 26,000. In the New England region, we lost about 600,000 acres of just dairy farmland in just one decade, from 1985 to 1995. In RI, we had 125 dairy farms in 1977. Today, we have 23 left.

And this trend continues today. At the same time that farming is getting more and more difficult for the farmers, there is still a huge demand for land to be developed. Our estimate is that, if current development patterns continue, at least 1,500 and possibly more than 3,000 additional farmland will be consumed by 2020.

This development trend, which also includes consumption of forested land at an even more aggressive rate, has a tremendous impact on our landscapes, the rural character of many of our suburban and rural communities, the vitality of our urban communities, the fiscal health of many of our municipalities, our air and water quality, and our ability to protect our air, land and waters. It also threatens what is still a significant part of our economy. RI farming contributes at least \$95 million to our economy and as much as \$140 million. If we lose those additional 1,500 acres by 2020, we lose about \$13 million in economic value from just the agricultural products that could be produced.

It's not development or growth per se, but rather where and how we grow and how much land we consume in the process. Land consumption in RI increased by 147% between 1961 and 1995, 9 times faster than the 16% population growth over the same period. At this rate, RI communities are expected to reach their buildout potential by 2020, if not before.

So we try to protect the land while we still can. In 1998, Governor Almond set a goal of protecting an additional 35,000 acres of open space by 2010, recognizing that the original target of 2020 might be too late. In RI, that's a lot of acres. Since the State got into the land protection business in the 1960s, it has managed to protect about 65,000 acres. Private protection efforts have brought us to a total of about 85,000, which is about 13% of our overall land area. Since 1994, when the original goal was set, we have together protected an additional 8,000 acres. That includes 42 farms and 3,237 acres of farmland, among which 12 dairy farms. "We" being constantly changing partnerships of the State, municipalities, land trusts, nonprofits and private donors. And our current target is to add at least 3,000 acres per year.

But protection of farmland does not always mean protection of farms and does not always preserve the economic, cultural and other social benefits they provide. A lot of protected farmland is no longer being farmed. That is particularly true for former dairy farms. Dairy farmers in particular are struggling as most of them are not able to capture the retail market themselves or otherwise connect directly with consumers, something that's easier to do for nurseries and orchards, for example.

When we lose working farms, we lose economic value. When we protect farmland, but not the farming, we frequently lose stewardship, and that can mean significant challenges in terms of managing the resource.

So we focus more and more on sustainability of farming and other resource-based industries. We need to do more than buy the land or the development rights. At the macro level, we need to reverse the trend of massive population shifts from cities to the country, by revitalizing our urban communities and making urban living more attractive. At the same time, we need to bring down the rate of land consumption, for example by promoting compact development and conservation zoning. On a more direct scale, we need to protect the viability of farming, on the revenue side, for example by helping to develop business strategies like diversification, as well as the cost side, such as lowering taxes.

But these measures are most likely not sufficient to keep dairy farmers in business. And that's where the Compact comes in. It provides some measure of market stability, and some degree of financial security, without which it is basically impossible to run a farm like a business, plan for improvements, plan for the future.

This is why reauthorization of the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact is critical. Critical to our dairy farmers and their survival. But also critical to preserve our environment, our landscapes, our culture, our character. Quality of life means nothing when we pave over our open spaces and develop it in ways that you no longer know whether you're in RI or NJ or FL. Quality of life depends to a large degree on uniqueness.

Dairy farms in New England provide uniqueness. Before electricity was available, they had to locate near flowing water to cool milk and water the cows. Our remaining 23 dairy farms in RI are generally located near streams or ponds or wetlands, and usually they also have a strong forested land component. It's a unique setting that is not very conducive to transitioning into other types of agriculture such as nurseries. And the isolated nature of many dairy farms makes it hard to utilize business strategies like road stands. But these same factors protect the uniqueness of dairy farms, including the unique ecosystems they are part of.

We feel strongly in RI that we have an obligation to protect this uniqueness and the many values associated with dairy farms. We're investing time, energy and money. We're setting aggressive targets. But we need help. We, not just the farmers themselves, but all of us who care about quality of life and uniqueness. The Dairy Compact is a critical element of our agricultural policy as well as our environmental protection strategy. It is imperative that we secure its reauthorization.