More than 50 Members of Congress join together to fight for family farmers

Rep. Peter Welch and a bipartisan group of more than 50 members of the House launched the Congressional Dairy Farmers Caucus at a Wednesday morning press conference in the Capitol. Representatives from California to Florida to Pennsylvania and Vermont joined together to declare that the critical issues confronting the American dairy farmer will not go unheard in Congress.

"Congress bailed out the Wall Street banks because they were ‘too big to fail.' If we don't act now to support our dairy farmers, aren't we saying they are ‘too small to matter'?" Welch asked. "Only by working together across regional lines and party lines will we be able to help dairy farmers survive in the short-term and help the dairy industry thrive in the long-term."

Welch and more than a dozen members of the Caucus spoke Wednesday morning about the vital importance of dairy throughout the country. There are nearly 70,000 dairy farms nationwide, approximately 99 percent of which are family-owned. These dairy farmers produce more than 170 billion pounds of milk annually and contribute tens of billions of dollars to the U.S. economy every year. Unfortunately, the economic woes of the past 12 months have had a significant impact on the dairy industry nationwide. As of June 2009, prices on average have dropped over $6.00 per hundredweight, dramatically below the cost of production.

In Vermont, roughly 250 dairy farms have closed over the past five years, leaving the state with

just over a thousand. Thirty-two have closed this year alone. Dairy represents roughly 70 percent of Vermont's agricultural economy.

"Dairy farmers are suffering a rapid and devastating economic collapse as the cost of milk production continues to rise and prices plummet," said Rep. Joe Courtney, another co-chair of the Caucus. "We must reevaluate the current dairy support system and examine the changes that must be advocated at the federal level. Local dairy farms are an important part of our communities' heritage and we must provide the appropriate assistance they need so they may continue to be a part of the future."

The Congressional Dairy Caucus was created during the 110th Congress in advance of the most recent Farm Bill but was not reauthorized at the beginning of the 111th Congress. The Caucus will serve as a mechanism to build consensus on legislation impacting the dairy industry while also serving as a means to educate members and their staff on issues of concern to the industry. Additionally, the Caucus will work with industry leaders, dairy economists, and most importantly, farmers and distributors to reach common sense bipartisan solutions to address the current dairy crisis.

Jerry Kozak, President and CEO of the National Milk Producers Federation, said, "The complexities of dairy policy, and the diverse size and scope of dairy farming in the U.S., means that we need a forum in Congress for dairy farmers to interact with their elected officials. The congressional Dairy Farmer Caucus will help facilitate the communication between, and education of, members of Congress and the farmers they represent."

Click here for video of the press conference.

A list of caucus members follows.

Rep. Peter Welch VT-At Large - Co-Chairman
Rep. Joe Courtney CT-2 - Co-Chairman
Rep. Thomas Rooney FL-16 - Vice Chairman
Rep. Chris Lee NY-26 - Vice Chairman
Rep. Harry Teague NM-2 - Vice Chairman

Rep. Michael Arcuri NY-24
Rep. Tammy Baldwin WI-2
Rep. Roscoe Bartlett MD-6
Rep. John Boccieri OH-16
Rep. Leonard Boswell IA-3
Rep. Allen Boyd FL-2
Rep. Henry Brown SC-1
Rep. Dave Camp MI-4
Rep. Dennis Cardoza CA-18
Rep. Chris Carney PA-10
Rep. Mike Conaway TX-11
Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper PA-3
Rep. Rosa DeLauro CT-3
Rep. John Hall NY-19
Rep. Wally Herger CA-2
Rep. Brian Higgins NY-27
Rep. Maurice Hinchey NY-22
Rep. Paul Hodes NH-2
Rep. Steve Kagen WI-8
Rep. Ron Kind WI-3
Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick AZ-1
Rep. Rick Larsen WA-2
Rep. Blaine Luetkemeyer MO-9
Rep. Ben Ray Lujan NM-3
Rep. Dan Maffei NY-25
Rep. Betsy Markey CO-4
Rep. Eric Massa NY-29
Rep. Michael Michaud ME-2
Rep. Walt Minnick ID-1
Rep. Chris Murphy CT-5
Rep. Scott Murphy NY-20
Rep. Devin Nunes CA-21
Rep. Jim Oberstar MN-8
Rep. John Olver MA-1
Rep. Tom Perriello VA-5
Rep. Thomas Petri WI-6
Rep. Chellie Pingree ME-1
Rep. Adam Putnam FL-12
Rep. Ciro Rodriguez TX-23
Rep. Mike Rogers MI-8
Rep. Mark Schauer MI-7
Rep. Joe Sestak PA-7
Rep. Carol Shea-Porter NH-1
Rep. Bill Shuster PA-9
Rep. Mike Simpson ID-2
Rep. Louise Slaughter NY-28

Rep. Glenn Thompson PA-5
Rep. Paul Tonko NY-21
Rep. Timothy Walz MN-1
Rep. Lynn Woolsey CA-6