EPISODE NAME: A Follow-up on Vermont’s ‘Farm First’ Program

Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. This afternoon we are following up on the Farm First program. We told you about Farm First when it was launched in 2009. It's proven to be an invaluable resource for Vermont dairy farmers and their families who offer so much to our economy and our communities. With financial and weather related hardships stressing the pockets of many dairy farms this year the state Agency of Agriculture along with UVM Extension and other organizations continue to sponsor the Farm First program with the goal of providing employee assistance services to dairy producers in Vermont. To begin our discussion I'm joined by Vermont's Agricultural Secretary, Chuck Ross. Great to have you back on the show.

Chuck.: Great to be here, Judy.

Judy.: Let's start off by giving us a snapshot of dairy farming in Vermont today?

Chuck.: Right now we're in the heart of the summer it's a big time for production things are moving things are happening. We've had some challenges and concerns. Weather has emerged sometimes too dry and sometimes too wet but it's an exciting time in agriculture. We continue to be a number one direct marketer in the country were continuously great at innovation on food hubs and things like that in fact we had administrator Dave Shipman here from USDA to learn and study about what's happening here in Vermont. The good news is we have a farm bill that seems to have a new dairy package that's going to stay intact as proposed by both on the senate side and supported on the house side. That's good news for the dairy farmers but not everything is beautiful and pretty. We do have the issues out there. There is still a lot of stress in the dairy community. Some farmers are still dealing with the aftermath of Irene and its impact on their business. Milk prices are down feed prices are up that makes it tough on the profitability side. The weather is still an issue but in spite of that there's always the other side too. We see growth and process of dairy products we have new ventures like the Green Mountain Organic Creamery in Hinesburg with Cheryl and JD DeVos. It's both good but the stress is still there.

Judy.: How did the Farm First program come about?

Chuck.: Its origin was back in 2009 we were in another down cycle in the dairy world and the dairy economy. We brought it into the picture because the dairy farmers get in a tough spot the times
through these down cycles and price of milk drops. They like everybody else are confronted with an array of stresses and when the price of milk is something you cannot control and it goes down the tank it throws the whole business of the dairy farm into a difficult place. Dairy farmers like the rest of us have an array of challenges then they have this business challenge that they can't control. They can be isolated geographically their isolated professionally and not everybody is a dairy farmer these days in our community and they're not a part of a business that has a wraparound services that can help them address some of the stresses they face.

Judy.: If you look at dairy farming or farming in general there so many things you can't control. You can't control the weather you can't control prices that's very stressful.

Chuck.: It is very stressful. The Farm First program has an employee assistance program that provides an opportunity for the dairy farms to pick up the phone when things are tough and talk to somebody and either walk through their situation on the phone or get a referral from to Farm First which is an incredibly important resource and a business tool for those farmers. We're really grateful to have the program in place and really wonderfully appreciate if of the support we've gotten from the agricultural sector that has put up the money to make this available from the UVM Extension service has been a key sponsor over the last number of years.

Judy.: How does the Farm First program actually work? You just make a phone call?

Chuck.: It is just a phone call and you'll be showing a phone number on your screen today which is a number that a farmer can pick up. That doesn't have to be the husband or the wife it can be anyone on the farm who can pick up that phone and make the call to get some counseling if they need it or a referral for anything from financial issues right through family counseling issues. All those things affect farmers just like they affect the rest of us and they need some help from time to time and this time where we have really difficult dairy prices and we've had the aftermath of Irene we do have farms in some situations that warrant some assistance.

Judy.: We will provide the contact information a few times during today’s program. The toll free number to call for Farm First is 1-(877)-493-6216 or you can use the website on your screen it's investeap.org. We will tell you more about the website at the end of this program. Chuck who pays for Farm First?

Chuck.: We've had an array of sponsors over the years. I am proud to say the agricultural community has really stepped up and made contributions to fund this program and the UVM Extension service as I mentioned Vermont will mentioned has been a key funder. It’s wonderful it's the agricultural community helping the agricultural community. I will tell you as the AG Secretary for the state we will welcome support from all corners.

Judy.: For additional specifics on the Farm First program we are joined now by Myra Handy. Myra is a social worker and the clinical manager with the largest Vermont based employee assistance program Invest EAP. Nice to have you with us again.

Myra.: Thank you it's nice to be here.

Judy.: Some Vermonters have an employee assistance program in their workplace but for those who are not familiar what is it?
Myra.: Employee assistance programs are free to the employee and in this case the dairy farmer. For any kind of issue that's concerning them relationship issues are big having financial issues mental health issues stress and anxiety depression anything financial legal anything that's of concern to the employee is something we'll try to help them with.

Judy.: How does this translate to dairy producers?

Myra.: Dairy producers are self-employed so they've been really isolated from getting help. They often don't even think there's anything out there for them. We've been serving them for about 60 dairy farmers a year for the last three years. They will call us for their main issues that they call our relationship financial and stress or mental health issues. Then the other issues that come up. All of those are things that all of us could have problems with other issues that come up our addiction issues family concerns anger management elder care or child care that kind of thing. Dairy farmers right now are stressed by financial issues of course and they're calling for that as well as getting help with that they're getting help for everything else.

Judy.: It's all pretty much connected for the most part if you're struggling financially then everything else piles on top of that.

Myra.: That's right.

Judy.: So all it takes is a phone call.

Myra.: That's right and sometimes dairy producers call because they have management issues with the employees and we can help with that as well. We also do crisis debriefing if there's been a tragedy on the farm weather related or fire that kind of thing we can go out to the farm and do debriefing. The work that we do for the dairy farmers really helps them stay focused on their job and safer on the farm.

Chuck.: Judy what's so important to the dairy community to understand is that these are services that other businesses have access to and for years dairy farmers the most independent and resilient group that sometimes think they don't need help but they are no different than the rest of us and it's wonderful to have Myra be able to provide these kinds of services that she does for many businesses in the state of Vermont.

Judy.: So these are confidential services what you do have some examples of the important kinds of assistance that Farm First provides.

Myra.: Yes I do and I want to point out that the telephone number is open 24/7 so farmers can call day or night whatever time of day is good for them. We often get calls in the middle of the day because that's when they come in for lunch but they can also call at night and follow the prompts to speak to a counselor immediately. In terms of relationship issues we've worked with farmers and we are working with farmers who are having family stressors. Family members who are having anger issues and blowing up at each other and the farmer ends up business wire is having a hard time moving forward with making long-term decisions. If they have one member obstructing that by having anger issues are anything like that. Our counselors will go out and work with farmers in an office near where their farm is and work with the families and come to some conclusions about how they're going to move forward. The relationship issues are getting a lot of care from our counselors financial issues we often will have somebody over the phone just impartial eyes and
figure out what is it. Often it's overwhelming debt to Ag. service providers and the farmer doesn't know what to do next. They are so overwhelmed so we will help them think about their assets and make decisions and when they call us they think of ago to give up my health insurance. They're paying $600 a month for health insurance is a lot for somebody who's in heavy debt. We will help them think about all the other things that they have and help them make decisions and those are really hard decisions to make. This is useful for them to be able to problem solve with a counselor who is someone not emotionally involved in the farm.

Judy.: Correct because that's a big issue a lot of farmers work with family members.

Myra.: Oh yes.

Judy.: You have the family dynamic intermingled with the financial situation and looking at the long-term health of the farm.

Myra.: That's right and often they cannot afford labor outside of the family partly because that's the costs to pay for the labor is just so high so their family members are coming back to the farm to help them deal with the business and it’s very overwhelming.

Chuck.: These are complicated businesses and when you add the complication of the family dynamic and all the history and baggage that can come with working with family and then you put on the business complications is a situation that people can benefit a great deal from being able to talk to someone like Myra and do a step by step problem solve with someone as Myra mentioned that's not emotionally involved in this situation.

Judy.: Also disabilities are a big issue as well because that such physical work.

Myra.: That's right. The primary reason for calling might be financial but during the conversation with the counselor all the other issues come out. Usually there is some sort of disability issue. Right now the summer we're talking to farmers who are working 18 hours a day. That might include a break at lunch time but they're getting up at 4:00 AM and they're not getting to bed until 10:00 PM. They are exhausted some of them talk about falling asleep on the tractor. So we have safety issues on the farm and farmers are smart at problem solving but sometimes when they get so exhausted it is helpful to talk to somebody to figure out what to do to take care of themselves.

Chuck.: The weather makes it even tougher because they're in a busy time of year now and the weather does not always cooperate. They have to push very very hard when the weather's good.

Judy.: What about the phone call itself was that a hard first step for farmers or as the years have gone by and this is been in affect are they more likely to call?

Myra.: I think both. The hard first step but now that they are starting to realize this is part of the infrastructure of agriculture in Vermont to have this program Farm First for making the call as well. The Ag. service providers to visit the farms through UVM Extension and the Agency of Agriculture are so well aware of Farm First now too so it's becoming more normalized for people to call.

Judy.: Can you tell me about some of the services that are provided to the farmers? I know we talked about counseling and so forth and financial?
Myra.: We also have access to agricultural mediation services that are either free or very low cost. So we've developed a lot of partnerships with some lawyers financial analysts UVM Extension has a lot of experts on Sarah and so does the AG. What we do is resource and referral as well as counseling so we can talk to the farmers. With counselors statewide it's not just me on the phone. We have counselors statewide to work with farmers wherever they are and then we also provide connections with all the other services that they could use. What we do is help them make a list of what they need and then we get them connected.

Judy.: Chuck why is it important for farmers to get the Farm First is out there.

Chuck.: Because they are an important business in our community and they're like the rest of us. They also confront stresses that can shape and damage their business and the family and one and I have this kind of service provided by Myra and the people she's working with this critical because it helps maintain business which is good for the people on the farm and that's good for our community that depends upon agriculture to be part of our community and part of our business economy.

Judy.: We're getting near the end of the program what's the first of the dairy family needs to take to access Farm First.

Myra.: All they need to do is to decide to call and call the number the number is on the screen right now. They'll reach me or they can dial zero to speak to a counselor immediately if I'm not there. Or they can leave a message for me and I'll get right back to them. And then I will refer them to counselors in the area or speak with them and the moment to help them figure out their next step.

Judy.: And don't put up barriers by saying I can't leave the farm because you can work around that.

Myra.: We can work around that.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for joining me today and talking about this program. It's a very important.

Chuck.: Thank you Judy. Thank you Myra.

Myra.: Thank you.

Judy.: That's our program for today thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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