



NYS PUBLIC HEARINGS REGARDING THE 2008-09 BUDGET-- Utica, NY Testimony Given by Troy Bishopp, Owner of Bishopp Family Farm

November 27, 2007

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen and welcome to the Mohawk Valley. My name is Troy Bishopp, sometimes referred to as “the Grass Whisperer”. I am proud to tell you that I own a 5th generation family grass-based farm in Deansboro, N.Y. here in Oneida County. We produce some of the finest grass-fed beef in the nation for our grazing customers from our cool season diverse pastures that have been served as far away as Japan. In addition, my daughters have a “4-H Project gone wild” herd of Alpine Goats and some amazing grazing chickens that produce a little taste of sunshine in every egg.

I am privileged to serve 4 townships as an Oneida Co. Farm Bureau Director. I am the Board Chairman for the Central New York Resource Conservation and Development Council (CNY RC&D), which serves 12 counties, from Cayuga to Sullivan County. I also serve as chairman for the New York State Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (NYS GLCI) steering committee and a member of the Regional Farm & Food Project.

I am, but one face of over 35,000 passionate New York Family Farmers from large to small, conventional to organic, dairy to livestock, fruits to vegetables and everything in between, that utilizes some 7.5 million acres of land and produces over 3.5 billion in revenue. These figures may seem impressive, however with a population of over 19 million people in the state, we represent less than 1% of this population. **This is not a sustainable position for the future of New York State.**

A 1988-1992 report from the NYS Council on Food and Nutrition Policy revealed that in order to ensure the goal of adequate nutrition, there should be explicit policies and resources in place to address; food processing capacity for locally produced foods, transportation and warehousing systems, access of all segments of the population to a local food supply, education on food, appropriate dietary intake and health related issues, and improvement and maintenance of local food subsystems through economic and conservation initiatives. The most telling conclusion was summed up by this quote, “any further erosion in New York’s agricultural industry would not be in the state’s best interest if it is to achieve its goal of nutritional adequacy for all of its citizens.”

Fast forwarding to 2007, we see even more concern about our food system surrounded by food insecurity issues, increasing poverty rates, an obesity and juvenile diabetes epidemic, loss of our mom & pop grocers and butchers, local processing infrastructure shortfalls and school lunch low bidder practices. We need strong leadership, consensus building, financial, environmental as well as social resources and a partnership across all party lines and principles to address this New York challenge and opportunity **NOW**.

I am excited and hopeful that with Governor Spitzer signing an executive order establishing a New York State Council on Food Policy, with Commissioner Patrick Hooker, also a farmer as the lead, that New York Farmers will gain valuable market share for their products raised here and feed our consumers here. For the security of the state and a robust healthy community of farmers and consumers we need to decrease our food importation into the state and reduce our fossil fuel footprint on the environment.

“Ensuring that all New Yorkers have access to safe, fresh and nutritious food is a top priority that the Council on Food Policy will be addressing head-on,” said Governor Spitzer. “The Council will bring the public, producers and government together to explore ways in which we can improve our existing food production and delivery systems, expand capacity, and in particular, address the critical needs of children and low-income New Yorkers. Additionally, by expanding the sale of locally grown products, we can help struggling farmers, and expand the local agriculture and state economy.”

This quote brings me to why I traveled off the farm tonight to talk with you about a NY grass-based dairy and livestock farming system and its relevance to our state. I want for you to close your eyes for a moment, and picture in your mind what farms looked like when you were 5 or 6 years old. OK, now let your palate’s remember the smells and tastes of Grandma’s kitchen. Are you remembering anything? This exercise is what we enjoy on the farm everyday and what we want our consumers to enjoy also. To make these memories last for our next generations we need to make some changes to our food system.

First, we need to build a statewide system of education and technical assistance that recognizes and utilizes New York’s unfair advantage, the over 3 million acres of grazing land for animal feedstock and animal grass-based food products for consumers. Managed grazing is mandated for organic animal production and animal welfare standards. In addition, with the high cost of fuel and fertilizers, the efficient use of this valuable resource by mouths and hooves, saves farmers critical dollars. The importance of keeping land in permanent cover also plays a key ingredient in conservation, for the protection of our watersheds, as well as open space and tourism opportunities. This resource is also on the horizon as a future fuel source. The Graze-NY Program addressed these concerns in only ten counties, but has been unfunded due to the elimination of federal earmarks. We look for some leadership in the state budget to make this a statewide initiative as a way to feed animals and consumers alike to some really great local, nutritious food, while saving topsoil to boot.

Secondly, we would like a major statewide overhaul and financial investment in our local animal harvest facilities that would allow us to sell more of our products locally and within the state. Animal proteins in milk, eggs and meat are an essential part of a balanced diet that can be realized from our farms. The lack of USDA inspected abattoirs has done more to inhibit the growth of our local food production system than can be emphasized in this document. We can send a man to the moon, but we can't fix the problem of selling meat to our New York consumers. Again, leadership and investment, along with increasing consumer demand for these local products will be the driver for change. With the advent of transportation costs and food recalls added to the Midwest and overseas animal products imported into the state, we find ourselves in an unsustainable quandary of not supporting our own farmers, land base and local economy.

Thirdly, I am especially sensitive to the school lunch program that comprises a low bid system of feeding the next generations. Having school age children, as well as college students not eating at least some local food is appalling to me as a local farmer. Again the importation of foods from outside of New York should be a wake up call to all that live and work in this state. The farm to school pilot programs in place now, are working with very positive results. I cannot over emphasize the importance of continued funding and leadership into these initiatives that will help shape a healthy future for our children.

Lastly, it would be remiss of me to not include asking for a continuation of funding for a strong support system initiated by Cornell University, SUNY Agricultural and Technical Colleges and Local Cornell Cooperative Extension Programs and all their research components that address animal and plant issues. I fully support a much needed, Cornell Small Farms Program that is very busy with a NY beginning farmer project, a NY grassland utilization work team, livestock processing work team and a work team on local markets. The New York Farm Viability Institute is also making strides in adding profitable strategies to the farm and linking consumers with their country neighbors. I also appreciate the Environmental Protection Funding and funding for the NY Agricultural Environmental Management Program (AEM) as a way to meet my conservation obligations and concerns. We cannot have a strong agricultural system without these essential financial components and support elements.

In closing, I do not envy your monumental task of putting together a state budget in the face of so many important challenges. Mr. Spitzer's commitment, leadership and support of initiatives for New York agriculture and to the food system are critical for a grass-roots farm family like mine. It is my passion that my farm lasts for many more generations to come. My ancestors kept it in the family by practicing a grass-based mind set, coupled with selling their diverse products locally with local infrastructure, namely a local milk plant, a local butcher and local grocers. How did we get so far from this important community system? And can we resurrect a version that meets the challenges of today?

My idea of growing many more farmers, feeding our own consumers using our own natural resources in a regenerative way seems to make sense if the leadership will enhance the policies and give us the financial power to make it happen. In the final analysis, farmers have always been the backbone of this state no matter what happens. The 1% of us left are pushing back, because we have to, to ensure that our sons and daughters continue to nurture the Lord's land and feed the people. I think if you keep us in the partnership of leaders, we bring a prospective and work ethic that cannot be matched on any level. Your going to need a good farmer on your side, that is used to the hard work while wearing a smile. Remember "No Farms, No Food, No Fuel, No Future" Any Questions?

Thank you for your attention to these important issues.

Troy Bishopp, "The Grass Whisperer"



