
Interview: Bobby Odom

Emergency action needed to protect milk supply

Louisiana Commissioner of Agriculture Bobby Odom is leading a movement for emergency federal intervention to prevent the mass ruin of dairy farms, and protect the national milk supply. He was interviewed on Jan. 31, by Marcia Merry Baker.

EIR: What is your concern in calling for emergency economic measures?

Odom: I was talking to one of my dairy farmers last night. In December, he received \$17.40 [per cwt, or 100 pounds] for his milk. He got his check the day before yesterday, and it was \$11.50, or \$11.60 [per cwt]. They can't exist like that.

The concern here in Louisiana, and, as I understand, throughout the South, and maybe all over the country, as I talk to other commissioners, is that we are going to lose a lot of dairy farmers. The message that I'm trying to convey to the secretary [of agriculture, Dan Glickman], and to everybody else, is that, if they are really sincere in saving the true family farm—the dairy farmer is probably the truest family farm we have left, and so, I think that even though we may have not ever done something that way, if the legal authority is there, I think we have to do whatever it takes to be able to keep these people in business. And the thing, to me, that makes so much sense, is that it is going to save the consumer money in the long term.

EIR: There is propaganda that “global sourcing,” and huge, factory cow-herds, for example, some 15,000 cow herd on the U.S.-Mexican border, will supply all of consumers' needs.

Odom: No way. I've just looked at the list. I've got 26 states that [members of the National Association of State Agriculture Commissioners] have voted “Yes” on this [emergency action]. I've only got four states that have voted “No.”

EIR: Who would be opposing this emergency action?

Odom: Wisconsin, Minnesota. I don't really understand why they are opposing it. It's not going to hurt anybody. It just won't help all of their farmers as equally as it will everybody else. But it's going to help everybody in every state, some.

EIR: There are precedents for such action. There is the famous case of Wild Bill Langer, the governor of North Dakota,

who mandated a floor on the wheat price for farmers in his state in the 1920s.

Odom: All we did is look back in milk, but I know what you're talking about. The other thing that we're moving on in the Southern states—and it's not an immediate fix, it takes some time—but we're looking at each state in the southern area to pass enabling legislation to form a compact.

EIR: So you have two separate, related initiatives?

Odom: That's right. A compact can't help you right now. It's a year away—at least that. We're doing the coordination. We're mailing out. As a matter of fact, today we've had our attorneys meet with some other attorneys looking at the enabling legislation, to make sure that we get it as clean as possible. It's going out to every state; we put it in the mail today. We're trying to coordinate that effort to make sure that the other states go with that enabling legislation. It doesn't mean they have to be in it. But, at least they've got the enabling legislation in place if they make the decision that that's the direction they want to go. And we can get this accomplished.

EIR: While U.S. dairy farmers staged “milk strike” actions of various kinds last week, dairy farmers in Italy are protesting the European Union milk output quota system, under which farmers are being ruined by the levy of heavy fines for so-called “overproduction.” The beneficiary of these “food scarcity” policies ruining farmers, is Philip Morris (which owns Kraft), the largest food processor in the United States, and third largest in Europe.

Odom: The [dairy] market is controlled by four companies—Kraft, and others—the four majors.

EIR: Your initiative is based on the idea that there are state and national economic interests at stake.

Odom: We have unusual times in this situation. And that gives Secretary Glickman the clear authority, when you have unusual times, to declare the emergency. You go into each order [federal milk marketing order, based on regions]. You floor it [the farm milk price] at \$13.50 [per cwt]. That at least gives them a little breathing room to be able to, hopefully, see the market turn around by that time, and keep them in business. And that's our total goal.

EIR: You're talking about Glickman using his administrative powers under conditions of emergency?

Odom: That's exactly right. It's got to be called emergency action.

EIR: What's the situation in Louisiana?

Odom: We were at 1,000 dairy farmers in 1980, when I took office. We're at 580 now. In my opinion, if this continues for four months, we'll be 200 fewer than we are today. We're going to do everything we can to try to make this turn around.