

# Marty Irby: USDA's Runaway Checkoffs Should Serve Family Farmers, Not Bankrupt Them

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, January 16, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- USDA's Runaway Checkoffs Should Serve Family Farmers, Not Bankrupt Them

By [Marty Irby](#)

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue's surprisingly divisive message to dairy farmers: Go big or go home.

"In America, the big get bigger and the small go out," Perdue said after an appearance at the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin in October. "I don't think in America we, for any small business, we have a guaranteed income or guaranteed profitability."

In that moment, the American family dairy farmer felt put out to pasture.

The backlash from small dairy producers across America has been fierce, and dairy farmers insist they are not giving up their livelihood without a fight, according to Mike Eby, a family farmer and the chairman of the National Dairy Producers' Organization who lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Dairy farmers are grappling with a wide array of problems: milk prices continue to decline; foreclosures, bankruptcies, and suicide rates are on the rise; and Mother Nature has taken her toll, while the plant-based beverage sector continues to gain market share.

It's been a tough few years for family farmers in the dairy business, but most folks don't really understand the root of the problem. Big Agriculture is sucking up the hard-earned dollars of family farmers and using those funds to lobby against the interests of the people it purports to represent.



Dairy Checkoffs Gaming the System



Animal Wellness Action Executive Director Marty Irby

To be precise, I am writing about Big Ag's big secret — a series of USDA checkoff programs for beef, pork, dairy, and other commodities. Major trade associations divert checkoff dollars that by law are restricted to commodity marketing programs and research and instead use a large share of the money for salaries, office operations, and lobbying. And that means lobbying for policies that often hurt family farmers.

[Report after report](#) has consistently revealed re-routing of these resources year after year under both Republican and Democrat Administrations.

But there is cause for optimism with the introduction of H.R. 5563 by U.S. Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV) in the House last week, the Opportunities for Fairness in Farming (OFF) Act. The measure's a companion to S. 935 introduced in 2019 by U.S. Senators Mike Lee (R-UT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Rand Paul (R-KY) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) - an unlikely group of allies.

The OFF Act doesn't seek to abolish the checkoff programs, as Big Ag beneficiaries have misrepresented - but would instead create transparency and accountability and prohibit checkoff funds from being used for lobbying. The bill also prohibits funds from being used to pay for staff and programs of trade associations that favor multi-national corporations and push small farmers out of business.

Right now, funds from checkoff programs benefit trade associations that promote frightening levels of consolidation within agriculture, and that does nothing to help the family farmers forced to pay into the program. They pushed for the repeal of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL), for dissolution of programs to prevent price-fixing at packing houses, and repeal of organic labeling provisions that would allow family farmers a value-added option for their products. As a result, the beef you see labeled as "Made in the USA" may have been produced in South America and merely packaged in the USA.

The effort for checkoff reform is supported by more than 80 farm organizations, representing over 250,000 family farmers and ranchers, alongside groups like the Heritage Foundation, National Farmers Union, R Street, Organization for Competitive Markets, American Grassfed Association, and even the National Taxpayers Union. We're all calling on Congress to take a second look — and hold Congressional hearings on the OFF Act to open the checkoff books to the public.

Let us be reminded of what President Abraham Lincoln said in 1864, two and a half years after he established the Agency, in what was his final address to the Congress: "The Agricultural Department, under the supervision of its present energetic and faithful head, is rapidly commending itself to the great and vital interest it was created to advance. It is precisely the people's Department, in which they feel more directly concerned than in any other. I commend it to the continued attention and fostering care of Congress."

That's clearly not the USDA we see today, and that's clearly not the USDA that Big Ag wants in Washington. If Big Ag fights against a simple hearing on the matter, it makes you wonder what the checkoffs have to hide.

Marty Irby is the executive director at Animal Wellness Action in Washington, D.C. who works with farmers to promote more humane and sustainable agriculture across America and was named as one of The Hill's Top Lobbyists for 2019.

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