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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

*Agriculture Biotechnology: A Look at Federal Regulation and Stakeholder
Perspectives*

October 21, 2015

Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and other members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to talk about agriculture biotechnology. I am testifying on behalf of Agri-Mark Dairy Cooperative and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives.

I did not grow up on a farm but got involved in agriculture through a 4-H dairy project as a young girl in 1989. Since then, I have not let go of my Jersey cows. I boarded my animals on neighboring farms and as fate would have it met a dairy farmer who I would eventually settle down with, bringing my Jerseys along. I have a bachelor's degree from Cornell University where I focused on agri-business management and a master's in business administration from the F.W. Olin School of Business at Babson College. Today, I live with my husband and our two farm boys on a 50-cow dairy in the beautiful Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. In addition to selling our milk to the co-op, we grow hay to sell, raise Jersey steers to process and sell beef locally, and we market a small amount of the composted manure. We farm about 200 acres of tillable land, including 50 acres of pasture where we graze our herd in temperate months. We also raise all of our own young stock.

In addition to being an active partner in the operation of our farm, I have a full-time job with a Farm Credit Association as a farm business consultant. I serve as first vice president of our County Farm Bureau, a director for the Vermont Jersey Breeders Association and as a dairy cattle judge for various youth and 4-H dairy shows across New England. I recently was appointed to the board of directors for an organization called the Truth About Trade & Technology, a non-profit advocacy group led by farmers who support free trade and farmers' freedom to choose the tools, technologies, and strategies they need to maximize productivity and profitability in a sustainable manner.

My husband and I are both proud to be first-generation farmers. Starting out on our own to build a dairy operation has been trying at times. But all the hard work we have endured could never outweigh the chance to raise our two young boys in a farming lifestyle, living on our family's land and caring for our animals while producing food for our corner of the world.

When we started building our operation, we knew that sustainability, including economic sustainability would be key in order to pass the farm along to our sons sometime down the road. We knew this would not be possible without diversifying our operation and using modern technology that would have a positive impact on our farm as well as the environment and community that surround us. My husband says, as a farmer, and a small farmer at that, we have so much working against us; we need to make use of things that will work for us.

Biotechnology crops are essential to sustaining our dairy. We feed our cows and calves biotech feed and when we can, we pasture feed our livestock. Harsh Northern New England weather makes this impossible for about six months out of the year so during that time, we feed cows and calves grass that we have processed into hay or grass silage. We also rely on both corn and soy

based feeds to complete a “total mixed ration” – one that balances the nutritional needs of our cattle with the protein and nutrients our forages provide.

This gives me a unique perspective on biotechnology. I believe that biotech varieties improve efficiency and productivity of farming in general. I also believe that biotechnology enables us to lessen the environmental impact that growing can have because less fertilizer and pesticides are used, which in turn means fewer times over the soil with equipment thereby cutting down on soil erosion and compaction as well as carbon footprint. Yields are typically higher and there are fewer weeds, growing a cleaner, more abundant crop.

The use of biotechnology on our farm is also important to the economic sustainability of our small business by keeping the price we pay for feed affordable. To compare prices, a Non-GMO basic 20 percent protein complete feed would cost \$555 per ton; the same conventional feed that we purchase is currently \$305 per ton. On our small farm, we purchase about 16 tons of grain per month. So, using 16 tons, that would increase our grain bill significantly, or in hard numbers we would spend \$4,880 per month for our regular feed or \$8,880 per month on non-GMO feed—a difference of \$4,000 a month or \$48,000 per year. I do not see how we could profitably farm in the long term with those increased feed costs, thus effectively pushing my small farm out of business.

It’s also important to note that our feed company does not have the infrastructure to carry and store yet another type of grain based on growing method – they already carry organic grain, which is generally non-GMO already. This means that we would have to pay a higher freight cost to ship the non-GMO feed to our farm.

Farmers and society alike benefit from the use of biotechnology. A common argument I often hear against biotechnology is that it requires increased amounts of pesticide use. Actually, it’s this very myth that launched me into better understanding genetic engineering and to speak up for my neighbors who use biotech seed for exactly the *opposite* reason – it lets them spray less pesticide. Through biotechnology, farmers have been able to decrease the amount of pesticide they use each crop season. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), overall pesticide usage in the U.S. peaked in 1982 and has been trending downward since. In fact, the introduction of biotech crops has accounted for a reduction of 2.5 million pounds of pesticide usage a year in the United States alone. Furthermore, only nine percent of corn farmers used insecticides on their crops in 2010. A study from the Economic Research Service at USDA conducted in February of last year shows insecticide use on corn farms declined from 0.21 pounds per planted acre in 1995 to 0.02 pounds in 2010. This is a 90.5 percent reduction.

Biotechnology goes hand in hand with other practices allowing farmers to tailor their particular growing method to best suit their resources and soil requirements. For example, many farms in my area choose to do no-till cropping, which allows farmers to plant corn or other crops without

tilling the land. This assists in the reduction of soil compaction and soil erosion. Several farmers are also using cover crops in my area despite the short growing season. Cover crops help to rebuild soil health and rebuild soil organic matter. Precision agriculture, which is on the horizon for more widespread use, offers even more opportunity to pinpoint areas in need of control media or pesticides thereby further reducing the amount used and sprayed on the land.

Beyond improved yields, fewer chemicals and reduced carbon footprints, agriculture has made many other advances through biotechnology over the years. This level of genetic engineering has sped up traditional plant breeding, making it more efficient and resource-effective. Biotechnology has brought us even more solutions for things like drought tolerance (DroughtGard corn launched in 2013), improved nutrition (Vitamin A and Golden Rice), disease resistance (Rainbow Papayas and the Ringspot Virus in Hawaii) and medical advancement (Diabetes and Genetically Engineered Insulin), to name a few. It also could help us answer other issues such as Citrus Greening, American Chestnut tree blight, and maybe even human diseases like Ebola.

I am disappointed that my home state of Vermont passed a mandatory GMO-labeling law that is set to take effect next year. The main argument pushing for passage of this bill was this idea that consumers have a right to know what is in their food. In my opinion, the Vermont law does not offer anything to better inform consumers about what is in their food but instead serves as a warning. I find the law to be frustrating and full of contradictions. For example, it applies to packaged and processed foods, but not if they contain meat. Thus a can of vegetable soup would carry a label but that same soup with added meat would not. Food in restaurants is exempted, thus a pizza in a store might require a label but a delivery pizza would not. At this time, dairy is also exempted, but my worry is that over time these odd exclusions would fall away.

Besides, I believe there are better uses of the state's time and taxpayer resources than imposing regulations on a technology that has been used commercially and proven safe for over two decades. I am also concerned about the impact this law will have on the cost and availability of food in Vermont's grocery stores, and whether or not food companies will decide to simply not ship food to the state because of the laws nonsensical labeling requirements. Our farm is not too far from the border with New Hampshire; we can get there in under an hour. No doubt there will be consumer confusion over having one label on food in Vermont, and another on the exact same products in New Hampshire and the rest of the country. This serves no one's interests—not consumers, not farmers, not food producers.

We also now have a better idea for what the costs will be with mandatory GMO labels. Costs will be incurred all the way down the value chain given new requirements for segregating crops for now a third growing method, adding non-GMO to GMO and organic. Currently this process is being driven by demand in the marketplace as it rises and over the past couple of years, the popularity of non-GMO products has grown significantly. These consumers choose to buy these

products despite the scientific consensus that supports the safety of GMOs. Conversely, with mandatory GMO labels, the costs of food in the grocery store will go up for everyone. A study out of Cornell University estimates an increase of about \$500 per family of four per year – that’s the equivalent of an apple a day for a year. That may not seem like a whole lot at almost \$10 per week, but the burden of this increase would be felt by those who could least afford it – people in my own community. Eighty percent of the children in our local elementary school qualify for free or reduced-price lunch already. These are the families who would be hardest hit for no good reason.

Government mandated labeling of GMOs perpetuates an unnecessary fear. People have a right to know what is in their food, but that does not equate to a mandated label, particularly as food from GMO crops do not pose any additional food safety or human health threat than non-GMO or organic crops. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires the labeling of anything about a product that affects health and safety or nutrition. Since the introduction of biotech crops to the general public in 1994 (i.e. the Flavr Savr Tomato), there has not been one documented case of associated illness. A review of 1,783 studies completed between 2002 to 2012 by a team of Italian scientists published in the September 2013 *Critical Reviews in Biotechnology* could not find a single example of biotech crops posing a threat to humans, animals or the environment. Further, a study released by a University of California, Davis geneticist in September 2014 reviewed 29 years of feeding animals from a period before GMO-feeds were introduced for animal feed and after (1996). The *Journal of Animal Science* article covered over 100 billion animals including examining animals pre- and post-mortem. They found no indication of any unusual trends, and concluded that GMO-feed is at least the equivalent and as safe as non-GMO counterparts.

I know a lot of organic farmers and now, some non-GMO farmers. Many are even great friends. And while I respect their decision to farm the way they choose, I personally do not agree with all of their practices, just as I am sure the pendulum swings both ways. I do know that we all care for our animals and our land to the best that we can and that alone builds a level of commonality. Trouble comes when the people using labels and loose advertising to sell products for their food company pit us against each other.

As a mother and a consumer, I do not purchase organic or non-GMO food in the store. I will support my local community, however, and may purchase organic or non-GMO food at a farmers’ market, directly at a farm stand or a local product in the store. I generally do not believe in paying the higher premium for these foods because they provide no added nutritional or other health benefits and environmental benefits are arguable. With a growing family and a growing farm business, we have lots of other places to spend our hard-earned money. Furthermore, I feel secure in the steps that have been taken by the FDA and USDA to ensure the food produced and available for sale in the grocery store is safe to feed my family.

I personally believe that there is room for many different styles of farming. I also believe that biotechnology plays a major role in our collective ability to not only feed a growing global population, but to also make individual improvements on our own farms be it 50 cows or 5,000 cows; a cash crop operation or an apple orchard; a multiple-generation farm or a beginning farmer. Even though less than two percent of the U.S. population now lives on farms or is actively involved in farming, agriculture comes in all different sizes and shapes.

The fact is that American farmers offer consumers more food choices than ever before. Of course, living and working on a farm and being exposed to farm publications and reports, I may have a more intimate knowledge about the way food is grown than the typical mom. That's not to say that the average consumer does not have a right to a better understanding of how the food they purchase is grown. The information is readily available. It's just a matter of getting it from reliable sources.

Moreover, I feel even better knowing that food produced with ingredients derived from biotechnology has been done so with some sort of advantage in mind – whether it's environmental, health or otherwise. I do not believe a mandatory GMO label is necessary; in fact I think there are more responsible ways to spend [my] taxpayer monies. Be that as it is, if consumers are to drive some sort of label requirement I believe it should be done in a voluntary and cohesive way at the federal level. Again, I do not believe those consumers who can least afford increased costs at the grocery store should have to bear the burden for a small percentage of consumers who are pushing for mandatory labeling.

I am happy to continue to speak up for our right to farm in the best way we know possible; which in our case includes the use of biotechnology. I will continue to pursue an active presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as more traditional communication routes via newspapers, church meetings or everyday conversation, sharing articles and ideas along with my knowledge about the opportunities and challenges we face as modern-day farmers and parents. If I have just one person reach out to me following my statement today, to ask about my perspective from the farm, then I will have succeeded.

We know more now than ever about growing food, or caring for animals, and this helps us to achieve a level of productivity that previous generations of farmers would envy. I am proud of how far the American farmer has come, just as I am proud of how far we have come on our own farm. I look forward to the day when our boys are grown and tell us they are ready to take over. I know they will carry the values my husband and I instill in them to be good stewards of our land, animals and community, and I hope they still have the ability to use the latest tools and technology to help them do so.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and to share my experience with agricultural biotechnology.

About Agri-Mark

Agri-Mark, with \$952 million in 2013 sales, markets more than 300 million gallons of farm fresh milk each year for more than 1,200 dairy farm families in New England and New York. The cooperative is headquartered in Methuen, Mass., has been marketing milk for dairy farmers since 1913, and actively represents their legislative interests in the Northeast and in Washington, D.C.

Agri-Mark owns three cheese and dairy product manufacturing facilities in Vermont and New York State and has a butter/nonfat powder plant in Massachusetts. Agri-Mark has also invested in operations to manufacture and market valuable whey proteins globally while also marketing fresh fluid milk from its local farm families to the region's largest dairy processors.

About the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives

Since 1929, NCFC has been the voice of America's farmer cooperatives. NCFC values farmer ownership and control in the production and distribution chain; the economic viability of farmers and the businesses they own; and vibrant rural communities. We have an extremely diverse membership, which we view as one of our sources of strength—our members span the country, supply nearly every agricultural input imaginable, provide credit and related financial services (including export financing), and market a wide range of commodities and value-added products.

American agriculture is a modern-day success story. America's farmers produce the world's safest, most abundant food supply for consumers at prices far lower than the world average. Farmer cooperatives are an important part of the success of American agriculture. Cooperatives differ from other businesses because they are member-owned and are operated for the shared benefit of their members.

Farmer cooperatives enhance competition in the agricultural marketplace by acting as bargaining agents for their member's products; providing market intelligence and pricing information; providing competitively priced farming supplies; and vertically integrating their members' production and processing. There are over 3,000 farmer cooperatives across the U.S., and earnings from their activities (known as patronage) are returned to their farmer members, helping improve their members' income from the marketplace.