

Statement of Joanna Lidback

**The Farm at Wheeler Mountain
Westmore, Vermont**

Member of Agri-Mark, Inc.



Member of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives



**Testimony before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Horticulture,
Research, Biotechnology, and Foreign Agriculture**

Societal Benefits of Agricultural Biotechnology

July 9, 2014

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Schrader, and other members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here to talk about the benefits of agricultural biotechnology. Today I am here on behalf of Agri-Mark Dairy Cooperative and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives.

My husband and I have a small 45-cow dairy located in northeast Vermont. We also make extra hay to sell, raise Jersey steers to process and sell beef locally, and market a small amount of composted manure. We rent our farm from my husband's aunt and uncle, and it consists of over 200 acres of tillable land, including roughly 50 acres of pasture where we graze our herd in temperate months. We also raise all of our own young stock or replacement heifers. We have two young boys, ages almost three and sixteen months.

Along with being an active partner on the farm, I have a full-time job with a Farm Credit Association that allows me to work remotely from our home, and serve as first vice president of our county Farm Bureau and as a dairy cattle judge for various youth and 4-H dairy shows across New England. 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 newly-minted 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.

My husband and I are both proud to be first-generation dairy farmers. We are excited to be raising our sons in a farming lifestyle – one which we think is extremely challenging at times but ultimately tremendously rewarding.

We are proud to farm in the Green Mountain State but sometimes that fact comes with some preconceived notions. To approach our farm with its rolling green hills and the cows grazing quietly in the pastures –taking note of the humble nature of our small farm – many passers-by have mistaken us for organic dairy farmers. However, we believe in the science and capability of biotechnology and its role in protecting the sustainability of our farm, which produces safe, affordable food for our fellow citizens.

To us, sustainability means living and farming in a way that meets today's needs while ensuring that future generations also can meet their needs. Every time I look into my sons' eyes, I realize that they are that next generation, which makes our responsibility that much more tangible.

Biotechnology crops are essential to feeding our cows and calves. When New England's harsh winters and late springs keep us from pasture feeding our livestock, we feed both corn and soy products. This gives us a unique perspective on the importance of GMOs. We believe that GMO varieties improve the efficiency and productivity. I also believe that GMOs lessen the environmental impact that growing can have because less fertilizer and pesticides are used to grow an abundant crop.

The use of GMOs is also important to the economic sustainability of our farm. In speaking with our animal nutritionist in preparing for this testimony, he pointed out that the only non-GMO feed he could get us right now was organic. An organic basic 20% protein complete feed pellet would cost \$758 per ton; the same non-organic feed is \$344 per ton. On our small farm, we purchase around 15 to 16 tons of grain per month. So, using 15 tons, that would more than double our grain bill, or in hard numbers we would spend \$5,160 per month for regular feed or \$11,370 per month on organic feed—a difference of \$6,210 a month or \$74,520 per year. I do not see how we could profitably farm in the long term with those increased feed costs.

The most recent example of biotechnology that we have utilized is genomic testing on our cattle. This not only helps us more accurately identify physical traits that impact our breeding decisions for future offspring of the animal, but also captures any genetic issue of concern. For example, the Jersey Haplotype 1, recently identified in Jersey cattle, is associated with early embryonic loss thereby reducing conception rate by an average of 3.7 percent. We choose to use sires that have been identified as JH-1 free, particularly if we know we have a cow that is a carrier. In doing so, we increase our chances for a more efficient reproductive cycle and ultimately less stress on the cow.

We also rely upon biotechnology for some of the medicines and vaccines we use for our cattle. Tests using Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), a DNA screening test, help us determine specific causes of mastitis in cows. This advancement in mastitis testing increases the speed and accuracy to a quantitative level in order to treat the specific cause of the infection. The PCR process can reduce result waiting time by as much as a week, providing the animal with more immediate infection relief using the most precise and effective treatment.

In the future, we also are considering growing our own corn and adding alfalfa to our mix. Given our location, we will need a shorter-day corn variety, meaning it would grow in less time than average. Without genetic engineering, we would not have this opportunity. Economically it would not make sense.

We face a challenge brought on by what many in agriculture see as irrational consumer fears creating the potential for limiting our ability to use biotechnology in order to best utilize the resources we have in a sustainable way. In many cases, this has already happened as we saw with the controversy over use of recombinant Bovine Somatotropin (rBST), a technology that has no adverse effects on human health. Consumers, not understanding the science and being driven by fear stirred up by anti-agriculture activists, rejected this technology for no sound reason. While many said that rBST was an example of the evils of “big agriculture,” the truth is that many small dairy farms used rBST as a way to improve and grow their businesses, better utilizing existing resources and without needing more capital expenditures. Now, driven by the marketplace, our cooperative generally must restrict its members from using rBST..

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 45 cows or 4500 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.

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 or directly at a farm stand. I generally do not believe in paying the higher premium for these foods because they provide no added nutritional or other health benefits. 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 to the food produced and available for sale in the grocery store to ensure it is safe to feed my family.

The fact is that American farmers offer consumers more food choices, while providing the safest food supply than any time in our nation's history. 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 typical 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 GMOs or GMO ingredients has been done so with some sort of advantage in mind – whether it's environmental, health or otherwise. I certainly 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 cohesive way at the federal level. Regardless, the marketplace is already figuring this out without legislative mandates with a non-GMO and certified organic labels.

You must be aware that recently my state, the state of Vermont, passed a mandatory GMO-labeling law. As you can guess, there has been a fair amount of coffee shop talk about it. I am frustrated with it. I believe that there are better uses of the state's time, and taxpayer resources, than imposing regulations on a technology that has been used 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.

I might also add that our farm is not too far from the border with New Hampshire; we can get there in under an hour. Doubtless 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.

I recently posted a letter that I wrote to the editor of my local paper on my blog, farmlifelove.com. It was in response to an organic farmer's letter who said that GMOs only perpetuate a wedge between organic and conventional farmers. I actually agree with his sentiment. However, in an attempt to defend organic farming, he went on to berate conventional farmers, or those farmers whom I believe are open to new technology – whether it's naturally derived or not. The funny thing is, I was more nervous about sending this letter in to my local paper than about anything I had ever posted on my blog. I was nervous that people in my community, my local beef customers for example, would take issue with my open stance on the use and labeling of GMOs. What I found was completely the opposite. I found support, good questions and many thank-yous for speaking up.

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 biotechnology and the use of GMOs. 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 as parents. If I have one person or ten people reach out to me for a question or appreciating my hands-on and practical perspective from the farm, then I have succeeded. And I have.

We know more now than we have ever have 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.

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