



Photo by Carla Occaso

Northeast Kingdom dairy farmer Dennis Wood, left, shows off his dairy operation to House Agriculture Committee members Rep. Scott Orr, D-Charlotte; Rep. Mitzi Johnson, D-Grand Isle; committee chairman Rep. David Zuckerman, P-Burlington, and vice chairman Rep. William Johnson, R-Canaan. The legislative committee visited Wood's farm Wednesday before holding a public forum on agriculture in St. Johnsbury.

## Agricultural committee taking field trips throughout the state

By CARLA OCCASO  
Staff Writer

**SOUTH KIRBY** - Most days, the Vermont House Agriculture Committee can be found at the Statehouse ploughing through complex manure handling regulations, farm taxation issues and genetically modified seed debates.

A couple of weeks ago, though, the 11-member panel was literally stepping into farm issues, far afield from its chambers in Montpelier. The members braved muddy back roads to go way up to the town of Kirby in the Northeast Kingdom, to visit the dairy farm run by Dennis and Mary Kay Wood.

"We're here to listen and to make ourselves available to the public," said Rep. Dick Lawrence, R-Lyndonville, while in the South Kirby barn.

The barn trip was one of many the panel has taken this year, and still plans to take. The committee, whose chair is Rep. David Zuckerman, a Progressive from Burlington who replaced the longtime Republican chair Ruth Towne, has made an effort to listen to what a wide variety of farmers have to say. The Wood farm was just one of several farms, maple sugar shacks and other operations visited by the committee this year.

According to Lawrence, the

### In Loving Memory of Victoria M. Medlin

January 18, 1920  
April 10, 2004

A light is from our household gone,  
A voice we loved is still.  
A place is vacant in our home,  
That never can be filled.  
You can only have one mother,  
Patient, kind and true,  
No other friend in all the world,  
Will be the same to you.  
When other friends forsake you,  
To mother you will return,  
For all her loving kindness,  
She asks nothing in return.  
As we look upon her picture,  
Sweet memories we recall,  
Of a face so full of sunshine,  
And a smile for one and all.  
Sweet Jesus take our message,  
To our dear mother up above,  
Tell her how we miss her,  
And give her all our love,  
Stephen, Scarlett, Melinda & Greg

idea is to find out what the concerns are out in the barns, forests and pastures rather than trying to legislate from Montpelier. Committee members have visited large dairy farms, a commercial maple production facility, a small sugarcane and small diversified farms that raise poultry and vegetables in Addison, Caledonia, Rutland and Bennington counties. A field trip to Franklin County is planned for next week.

What they've been hearing out on the farm is sometimes different from what they hear in committee chambers.

"We have a big problem with coyotes," Dennis Wood told the committee gathered in his bulk tank room. "I would like to see a season for coyotes. Now, if a coyote eats your calf, you absorb the loss," he explained, describing how his farm is surrounded by packs of coyotes that prey on his livestock at night. A calf is valued at about \$400 to \$500 while a grown cow can net into the thousands.

Not long ago, coyotes came onto his pasture one night and killed a newborn calf before injuring its mother.

Wood asked legislators to consider a state coyote season or bounty to manage the coyote population and to financially protect farmers. A season or bounty would give incentive, he said. An official season would make the state financially responsible to a farmer for the loss of livestock due to predatory kills, Wood added.

It is good for the committee to get out and see different parts of the state, Zuckerman said, but the biggest concern for his committee is establishing new water quality regulations mandated by federal environmental laws.

State water regulations would mostly mandate how manure is handled, from the "rate of application" of spreading manure to construction of manure pits and storage.

Such legislation would affect small- to medium-sized farms that have up to 699 cows. Larger farms are already regulated, Zuckerman said. "There are some concerns a number of farmers will close rather than meet the (new regulations)," Zuckerman said, but he emphasized the committee is trying to ensure regulations include making sure "funding flows" are there to help farmers meet new mandates.

Another priority for the com-

mittee has been drafting a water quality bill that complies with the federal Environmental Protection Act while making sure farmers can afford any new regulations, Zuckerman said. The panel is also dealing with whether to expand what farm operations should be eligible for reduced property taxation, such as small farmers who process milk to make cheese.

Zuckerman said the committee also wants to funnel more tourism money to farmers, since tourists come to Vermont to see farms dotting the landscape. "A .5 percent surcharge on rooms across the state would generate \$1.5 million annually for farmers and other rural needs," Zuckerman said.

Some farmers share the committee's priorities but others have different concerns.

David Randall of Kirby would like to see his heritage breed Randall Lineback cow declared the official state breed, for example. Other farmers in other parts of the state have said they are concerned about embryo transfer, slaughterhouse issues and the impact of genetically modified seeds, panel members said.

The Agriculture Committee members, despite their varying political stripes and farm experience, have worked well together this year. "This has been a very well-balanced committee as far as ideology and temperament," Zuckerman said. "I think that everyone has learned from these tours."

Back on the farm, folks like the Woods are still trying to make a living as their families have done for generations, no matter what goes on in Montpelier. Dennis Wood said he and his sister, Mary Kay, have been running their family farm since the 1970s.

They each left the farm and to attend college, but returned when Mary Kay decided to give up teaching and return home to the farm. In the old days, the Wood family bottled milk in North Kirby before delivering in Lyndonville, Wood said, pointing to old-fashioned glass dairy bottles lining the tank room wall.

Now, with 350 mostly wooded acres, the Woods milk about 65 to 87 cows at a time. The Woods are among a dwindling number of Vermonters clinging to the old way of life - a way of life the Agriculture Committee is learning firsthand how to promote and protect.

### Obituary Policy

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