Baldwin goes to the farm to talk turkey on ag issues

by KIM LAMOREAUX
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With a crowd of about 30 people following her, U.S. Representative Tammy Baldwin, D.-Wis petted cows, calves, hogs, and held a baby pig born just the day before on the Barbara Meier family farm in the town of Berry on CTR K.

Baldwin toured the 247-acre farm last week as a stop on one of her "Listening Sessions" focusing on agricultural issues.

Local agriculturists toured the Meier farm along with Baldwin guided by brothers Dan and Ed Meier, the sixth generation of Meier farmers in 135 years.

The Meier brothers worked in partnership with their father until his death two years ago.

Ed Meier said there were 200 head of dairy animals, and an estimated 300 hogs, with 50 sows, "because I never know who's in there having babies," he said.

Calling herself a "student," Baldwin listened, took notes, and asked questions of farmers whose concerns ranged from health care to the expansion of dairy compacts in the northeastern part of the United States.

"I want to take your expertise back to Washington," she told them. "The farm bill is clearly a center piece of debate this fall."

Baldwin has been reaching out to the agricultural community in the second district where, due to proposed redistricting, there could be an inclusion of more rural areas.

The group of farmers who attended Baldwin's discussion Tuesday were receptive and responsive to her request for their input.

Prior to the farm tour and discussion group, Baldwin had lunch with Dan and Karla Meier on Schuman Road.

Dan Meier said he had two main concerns he shared with Baldwin.

"Health care is at least available," he said. "Now they've got to make it affordable."

His other concern had to do with the smaller farming operations and fair play in the market.

"The big farmer benefits way more than the small farmer does," said Meier. "They need to find a way to level it out. With volume premiums in milk, the guy giving 20,000 pounds is going to benefit more. It should be the same."

His brother echoed the same concern.

"Ninety percent of hogs leave the state for slaughter," said Ed Meier. "I'd like to see it where a small producer can play the same game as the big producer."

Baldwin said it may be an issue for Attorney General John Ashcroft.

"I may be asking him what he plans to do in the justice system with monopolies," said Baldwin. "I represent a region in this county that has smaller operations. Small scale operations are struggling more. I'm fighting for the family farm where there are other values. You care deeply about what you do."

Ron Statz, National Farmers Organization, (NFO) legislation liaison, told Baldwin that putting more production in storage and pulling it out as the market would warrant was desirable to many farmers.

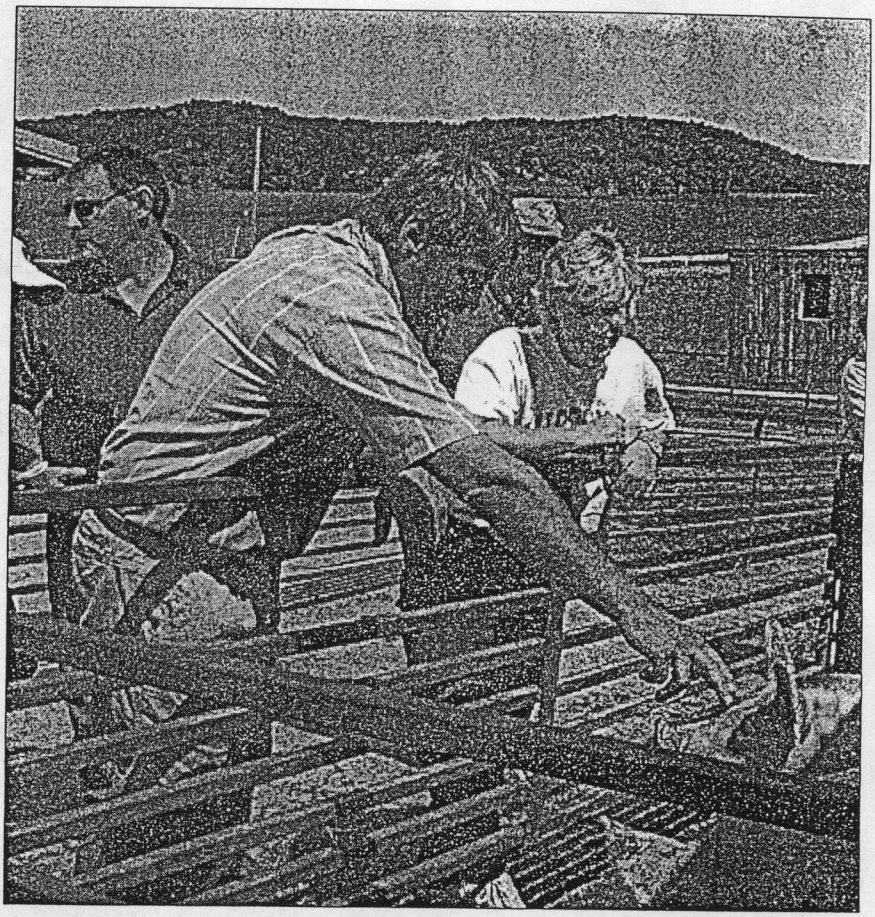
"The market share of the consumer dollar that the farmer gets has shrunk," said Statz. "We've added new segments to the consumer chain."

Statz added that perhaps dairy compacts were necessary.

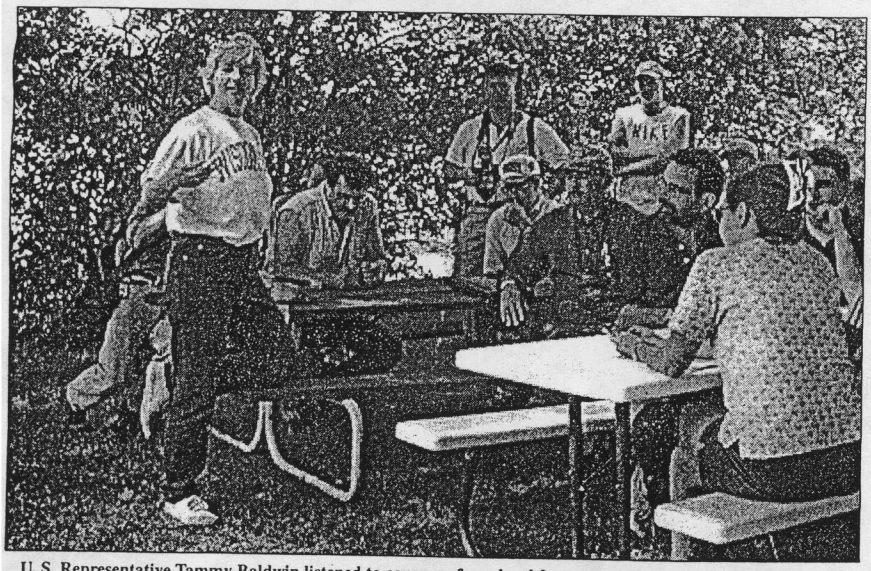
He said, "don't spend time tearing down the compacts until there is a better replacement to price milk nationally."

Bill Dobson, with the department of agriculture, applied economics, added that compacts should not expand to the southern United States.

"It would be most harmful if legislation allowed the expansion of the New England Compact into the south."



Ed Meier points to a healthy hog and says, "now that's what they should look like," as he gives U.S. Representative Tammy Baldwin a tour of his hog farm. photo by Kim Lamoreaux



U. S. Representative Tammy Baldwin listened to concerns from local farmers at the Barbara Meier family farm last week. Here she introduces her recently hired agricultural advisor, Cross Plains dairy farmer Jim Festge. photo by Kim Lamoreaux