



Remarks by Annie Watson

Recipient of the 2026 DACF Commissioner's Distinguished Service Award

Commissioner Beal, members of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, Members of the ACF Committee, colleagues, friends, and fellow farmers—thank you.

I am deeply honored and humbled to be standing here today. Maine agriculture is full of people who work quietly, persistently and often without much recognition- mostly because we are too busy chasing down problems that likely did not exist yesterday. So to be singled out among so many people I respect is something I do not take lightly.

When people hear “dairy farm,” they often picture a red barn and a few cows in a field—and maybe someone peacefully sipping coffee while the sun rises. And yes that does happen.

But it usually happens while you're also checking the weather, looking for the calf bottle you swear you just had, and realizing the “quick chore” you planned to check off the list is now a full-blown crisis involving a wrench, a zip tie, and a prayer.

When I think about Maine dairy farms, I don't just picture barns and cows. I picture families. I picture the kind of people who are up and moving before most of the world is awake. People who walk into the barn when it's ten below zero and still find a way to stay calm and steady—because the animals need them. People who can read the weather on the wind, who know their land so intimately they can predict where April's frost will linger the longest. People who can fix a broken water line in the dark with a headlamp, because what choice is there? And I also think about the farms that used to be here.

If you've lived in Maine for any amount of time, you know *that* feeling—driving by a pasture that used to have cows, now grown in with brush. Seeing an old barn leaning a little more each year. Those aren't just buildings, they're stories. They represent generations of work. And when farms disappear, we don't just lose production. We lose pieces of rural Maine.

My connection to farming is deeply personal. My husband Mike and I bought our farm in Whitefield in 2013. We were young-ish, optimistic, and I was just confident enough not to fully understand what we were signing up for.

We bought the farm from a retiring farmer to whom we will be forever grateful for his want to see it remain a farm, and we stepped into a life that was already in motion.

I remember those early days so clearly—not because they were easy, but because everything felt enormous. The responsibility. The physical work. And also the quiet realization that nearly everything on a farm eventually breaks—almost always on a weekend, when there is inclement weather.

I remember standing in the barn one morning early on with a newborn calf still wet from birth and thinking: Oh, this isn't just a job. This is a relationship. A commitment. A life.

And like most people who farm, we didn't build that life alone. We relied on other farmers—people who didn't have to help us, but did. People who would lend an ear, answer far too many of my questions, stop by to look at a piece of equipment, offered advice that saved us from expensive mistakes. Though we made plenty of those on our own. Neighbors who knew the land we were stewarding far better than we did, offering generational knowledge you cannot find in a book or on a map.

Dairy farming can be isolating, but it isn't lonely when you're part of a farming community that takes care of each other. That generosity is the heartbeat of Maine agriculture. So today, standing here, I would like to take the opportunity to say thank you.

First to my family—especially my husband, Mike. Your devotion and belief in Maine agriculture lit the spark that made me fall in love with you and this life, and it continues to be the most inspiring part of it all. Farming is a shared commitment, and the work doesn't stop at the end of the day. Working alongside you—building our farm and growing our family—has been the greatest adventure of my life. Thank you for your patience, you're welcome for mine, your support, and for being my steady partner in a life that can be anything but steady.

And thank you to our boys—Oliver, Henry, and Guthrie—who have grown up in this life and remind me constantly what it's really all for. Farming teaches you pretty quickly that your time isn't always your own, and I'm grateful for your hard work, patience, and ability to still make us laugh even on hardest days.

I also want to thank the farmers of Maine. You show up every day with resilience, creativity, and determination—often in the face of weather and markets and challenges completely beyond our control. Serving alongside you through MDIA, MOFGA, and the many other

organizations I have been fortunate to be involved with, has been one of the greatest, and most daunting privileges of my life.

And thank you to the staff at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. Strong agriculture depends on strong partnerships, and I've seen firsthand how committed this department is to listening to farmers, supporting rural communities, and protecting Maine's natural resources.

Now—I'll be honest—dairy farming is not romantic. Not most days. There are moments of beauty: cows grazing in the golden light, a quiet barn in the early morning, a pasture you worked hard to manage looking exactly the way you hoped it would.

But there are also moments like: crawling around trying to find a part that should cost ten dollars and somehow costs three hundred. Or realizing you're running on three hours of sleep and your day is just getting started. Or looking at your list and realizing you're carrying four jobs at once—caretaker, mechanic, accountant, and parent and spouse and neighbor on top of it all.

Dairy is heavy because it never stops. And yet—Maine dairy farmers keep showing up.

They keep caring for animals and land with a level of skill and attention that deserves far more respect than it gets. They keep adapting, improving, and pushing forward—even when it feels like the deck is stacked.

That is service. Real service. Not just in words, but in actions—every single day. And that's where I want to end today—because this is the part that matters most to me. I accept this award with gratitude, but also with a very clear sense that it doesn't belong to one person.

It belongs to a whole community.

It belongs to the farmers who get up in the dark and do the work anyway—on the days when it's joyful, and on the days when it's exhausting. It belongs to the families who build a life around this work, knowing the hours are long and the uncertainty is constant.

And it belongs to the farms that are still here. Because here's the truth: there are not many of us left. And the people who are still doing this—the farmers who are still milking cows in Maine—are not doing it because it's easy. They're doing it because they love the land. Because they feel responsible for the animals in their care. Because this work has been handed down, and they're trying with everything they have to hand it forward.

Sometimes we talk about farms like they're a part of Maine's past—like they're something nostalgic. A postcard. A memory.

But for the families living it, it is not a memory. It is right now. It is real. It is waking up early, missing dinner sometimes, worrying about whether the numbers will work this year, hoping the weather holds, hoping the market holds, hoping your body holds.

It is betting your whole life on something you can't fully control—because you believe it matters. And when I think about the future—when I think about whether my kids will have the option to choose a life in agriculture someday—I don't just think about business plans and policy. I think about whether we are going to be the kind of state that protects the people who feed it.

Because farms don't just produce food. They hold communities together. They keep land open and cared for. They teach kids what work looks like, and what responsibility looks like, and what it means to be part of something bigger than yourself. So yes, today I'm grateful. I'm proud. I'm honored. But more than anything, I'm determined.

Determined to keep advocating for farmers. Determined to keep building bridges between producers and policymakers. Determined to keep showing up for the people who show up every day—even when no one is watching.

And if this recognition does anything, I hope it reminds us of something simple: That Maine farms are not just part of our scenery.

They are part of our soul.

Thank you for this incredible honor.

Award presented during the Commissioner's Luncheon
At the 2026 Maine Agricultural Trades Show
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