

How Raw Milk Is Bridging a Gap Between Political Parties

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed Senate File 315 into law, which allows farmers to sell unpasteurized milk directly to consumers in the state
- › The ability to access raw milk has become restricted for Americans in many states, who must jump through hurdles in order to obtain this natural, wholesome food source
- › The issue has divided lawmakers throughout the U.S., but it's also drawn political parties together, bonded over the right to access traditional, healthy food
- › The Iowa State Dairy Association, the Iowa Dairy Foods Association and the Iowa Public Health Association lobbied against the bill to make raw milk legal in the state
- › By preventing farmers from selling directly to consumers, processors can and do price fix the market, ultimately leading to the intentional destruction of small, family dairy farms and consolidation of industrialized, concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) dairy farms

It's now legal to purchase raw milk in the state of Iowa, with caveats, making it the latest state to protect residents' food freedom. The move came after Governor Kim Reynolds signed Senate File 315 into law,¹ which allows farmers to sell unpasteurized milk directly to consumers as of July 1, 2023.²

Humans have been consuming "raw" milk, also known as fresh milk, for thousands of years.³ It's the only kind of milk there was. But the ability to access raw milk has become

restricted for Americans in many states, making it necessary to jump through hurdles to obtain this natural, wholesome food source.

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Political Parties Come Together Over Right to Drink Raw Milk

The choice to sell, purchase and consume raw milk belongs with the individual – not a state or federal government – but Big Dairy has succeeded in keeping raw milk out of the hands of many Americans who want it. Joel Salatin, who's best known for his regenerative agriculture at Polyface Farm in Virginia, told Politico in a 2014 interview:⁴

"I realized that any time the government tries to get in between your lips and throat – that was a pretty drastic invasion of privacy and freedom ... The Bill of Rights grants us many, many rights, but we do not have a right to food because the framers could not have imagined the day where you couldn't milk your cow and sell it to your neighbors. This is fundamentally about freedom.

What Big Ag will say is that it's high-risk. But the diseases we have now are a result of Big Ag ... When Teddy Roosevelt started the Food Safety and Inspection Service, that was done at the behest of the food industry. He was glad to start an agency to give the industry a stamp of approval. The industry has been hiding under the skirts of bureaucrats ever since."

Salatin went on to say that the movement to bring raw milk mainstream is one that brings unlikely parties together, including "urbanite foodies" – "read: progressives," Salon reported⁵ – environmentalists and others. Salatin said:⁶

"It does make for some very strange bed fellows. When I give speeches now, the room is half full of libertarians and half full of very liberal Democrats. The bridge is food ... For many on the right, creating a space for a local food market beyond the reach of both large corporations and the government is a high priority – a right, in their view, best secured by libertarian politics.

... There are evangelicals behind the move to make animal agriculture more humane. There are plenty of dyed-in-the-wood conservative ranchers practicing holistic management and producing pastured animals for local markets. The media like to depict the food movement as an elite coastal phenomenon, but you find manifestations of it wherever you go."

Big Dairy Lobbies to Keep Raw Milk Outlawed

The Iowa State Dairy Association, the Iowa Dairy Foods Association and the Iowa Public Health Association lobbied against the bill to make raw milk legal in the state. The move is unsurprising, as the war against raw milk has been one of the most successful, fear-based campaigns ever created to monopolize an industry.

By preventing farmers from selling directly to consumers, processors can and do price fix the market, ultimately leading to the intentional destruction of small, family dairy farms and consolidation of industrialized, concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) dairy farms using taxpayer-funded subsidies.⁷

Although the Iowa bill was approved, there are still restrictions that will hold small farmers back. Raw milk may only be sold directly to consumers from the farm – not at farmers markets or retail stores. And raw milk farmers are limited to raising 10 or fewer milk-producing animals.

Those animals must have annual checkups with a veterinarian,⁸ while the raw milk must be tested for levels of coliform bacteria monthly and has to be distributed within seven days.⁹ Further, as reported by Food Safety News:¹⁰

"Raw milk sold on farms must carry labels warning about the lack of inspections or freedom from regulations involving pasteurization and grading. Raw milk dairies will have to submit to testing, mostly on animals, and keep records that health officials can access."

Stifling Raw Milk Keeps Big Dairy Rich, Small Farmers Suffer

If farmers sell raw milk to consumers in states where it's not allowed, they can be slapped with fines and jail time.¹¹ But producing milk that's sent to be pasteurized for Big Dairy also keeps dairy farmers in veritable chains. There are only an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 farms with dairy farms in the U.S. — down from 1.1 million in 1964.

"Dairy farmers today receive about the same price for their milk that they received in World War Two!," A Campaign for Real Milk reports. "No wonder they are going out of business at the rate of about 16 per week."¹² Mandatory pasteurization laws are a significant part of the reason why so many small farmers can no longer make ends meet.¹³

"Bans on raw milk sales for human consumption have left the dairy farmer chained to a commodity system that has worked to consolidate the dairy industry by rendering most dairy farms unable to pay off debt and expenses. Many states have lifted bans on raw milk sales or distribution over the past twenty years but still limit revenues due to restrictions on venues for raw milk distribution or a cap on the quantities of raw milk that can be sold."

How Raw Milk Can Bring Farmers Out of Poverty

A Campaign for Real Milk outlined the stark difference in income for farmers selling conventional, pasteurized milk compared to those selling raw milk — and it's easy to see why Big Dairy wants to keep this under wraps. A conventional dairy farmer may receive about \$16 per hundredweight — or per 100 pounds, which keeps him and his family in near-poverty:¹⁴

"In order to maximize his return, he has modern Holstein cows and he feeds them lots of grain. So, he may get 190 hundredweight per year from each cow, which works out to a total yearly income of about \$90,000 in round numbers, most of which is eaten up with feed and vet bills.

His wife has to work to bring in some cash and obtain health insurance, and they live just above the poverty line. If they have gone into debt and the prices

drop even a little bit, or their cows produce less than expected, they lose their farm."

In contrast, a farmer selling raw, grass fed dairy directly to consumers will have a very different outcome – one that allows him to thrive while selling a superior, healthier product to his customers:¹⁵

"He would use Guernseys, Jerseys or some other old-fashioned breed because these cows do better on grass. He would only get about 100 hundredweight per cow per year, about half as much, but if he sells the milk at \$6 per gallon, he would get at least three times as much for the milk. Actually, some farmers are getting \$10 or even \$15 per gallon for their raw milk, but let's be conservative and stick to the figure of \$6 per gallon.

If he sells it at \$6 per gallon, he makes about \$73 per hundredweight. At \$73 per hundredweight, he grosses \$7300 per cow per year. With 30 cows his gross income on the milk products alone is \$219,000. If he makes cheese, yogurt, kefir or butter, his gross income will be more.

But there's more. If Mike makes butter, cream and cheese, he will have whey and skim milk as by-products, which is free food for pigs and chickens. So, in addition to milk and milk products, he can sell eggs, chicken, turkeys, pork, bacon and lard as by-products."

Raw Milk Boosts Rural Economies – But Quality Matters

Meanwhile, raw milk farmers can provide a major boost to rural economies. If 100 farms in Wisconsin could provide raw milk to 50 local families, it would lead to more than \$10 million in "increased wealth and well-being" for Wisconsin residents, according to the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund.¹⁶ A Campaign for Real Milk adds:¹⁷

"If just 10% of the U.S. population bought raw milk, raw butter, raw cream and raw cheese directly from farmers, as well as all the other products produced on the farm, we would need about 75,000 100-acre farms each with 30 cows.

If each farm generates an annual income of \$250,000, the total revenue is over \$18 billion, year after year, much of which stays right in the local community. (If the whole country drank raw milk, the total would be over \$1.5 trillion ... This is real wealth and every raw milk drinker participates in creating it."

The fact remains that raw milk is a rich source of nutrients, fats, anti-inflammatory properties, beneficial enzymes, probiotics and more, with consumption linked to reduced incidence of asthma, allergies, eczema and respiratory infections.¹⁸

But no matter where you stand on the raw milk spectrum – from fully embracing this whole food to not being a big fan – it's hard to argue against the right to eat and drink whatever you please. So, the legalization of raw milk – or lack thereof – is, as Salon noted, very much an issue relating to "personal liberty and government overreach"¹⁹ just as it is one of health and nutrition.

When choosing raw milk, remember that quality matters. Raw milk produced by CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations), which is intended for pasteurization, is typically not safe for consumption. It comes from cows living in filthy conditions that are typically in poor health.²⁰

This type of CAFO raw milk often tests positive for pathogens and must be pasteurized to kill the pathogenic bacteria before it's safe to drink. Raw milk that's produced by small, grass fed dairies, which is intended to be consumed in its fresh state, is another animal entirely. Even so, the Raw Milk Institute has created standards to look for when choosing raw milk to ensure its quality and safety:²¹

Have a Risk Analysis and Management Plan (RAMP) for raw milk production; this is a basic food safety plan that includes risk assessment and mitigation for milk handling, manure management, feed sources, human factors (such as health of the milking team), nutritional management of the cow, cleaning protocol, health screening of animals and much more.

Raw milk shall not contain zoonotic pathogens including salmonella, E. coli,

campylobacter and listeria.

Testing for coliform bacteria, with a target rate of less than 10 coliforms per milliliter (ml) raw milk over a three-month average.

Testing for Standard Plate Count, with a rolling three-month average of less than 5,000 per ml raw milk.

Sell raw milk for direct human consumption only from their own farm (not comingled with raw milk from other dairies).

Provide documentation and assurance that herds are tuberculosis (TB) free and tested once per year or meet local TB requirements.

Provide documentation or assurance that herds are brucellosis free.

Sources and References

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- ^{14, 15, 17} [A Campaign for Real Milk, The Economics of Raw Milk](#)
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- ¹⁸ [Raw Milk Institute, About Raw Milk](#)
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- ²¹ [Raw Milk Institute, Common Standards](#)