

Wisconsin Farms in Crisis

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 12 June 2019 07:13

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisc-dairy-farm-s5.jpg>



Sen. Smith writes about the challenges facing our local farmers, their hard work and commitment, and the important role they play in our communities.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - You rarely hear complaints from farmers about their job because they love what they do, but you will hear an earful about the weather, milk prices and the occasional tractor breakdown. June is dairy month and there's no better time to recognize the work dairy farmers do and the challenges they face.

Farmers need to be expert mechanics, scientists, business owners and creative geniuses to make a farm thrive. Factors beyond their control make even the smartest or the hardest working farmers face bankruptcy.

Farmers have seen glorious and terrible times throughout our history. In the 1930s, many farmers lost it all when the soil they relied on was literally blown away. In the 1980s, banks held auctions on farms they re-possessed after numerous farm bankruptcies.

Wisconsin farmers find themselves in desperate times. Much has been written about the plight of our farms, especially our dairy farms. We've lost dairy farms at an alarming rate – we are losing nearly two farms each day. Farm families deserve better.

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My friend Mike told me a story about growing up on their farm in the 1980s. It was a difficult time and the neighboring farm family found the father hanged in their barn – he chose suicide instead of seeing everything he worked for in life come crashing down.

Soon after that horrible discovery, and a major rain event, Mike's father got his tractor stuck in the mud right before the harvest. The son of the deceased farmer came to help Mike's family farm. They got the tractor out of the mud and the crops harvested, but sadly, the family of the deceased farmer had to give up their farm. Even in terrible despair and grief, one farmer came to the rescue of another.

Farmer suicide is at an all-time high in Wisconsin. I've heard from farmers who found themselves at the brink but were talked out of taking that final terrible act. Counseling can help. The weight of mental strain on farmers struggling is incredibly difficult to bear due to the pride they take in their work and the consequences of each big decision. If we know a farmer struggling to make ends meet, we all need to offer support.

Understanding how we arrived at this crisis is just as complicated as the solutions to overcome it. Climate change has caused dramatic weather patterns. Farmers need to know impossible answers to important questions. Will it be a wet spring like this year? Will we experience a drought? Will the fall harvest be delayed? Even with the help of modern science, unpredictable weather causes major problems for farmers.

Low market prices is another factor out of a farmer's control. Family farms can't make a profit due to the overproduction by factory farms, the greater dependence on foreign markets and global tariffs. Federal rules and market boards make determinations that can make or break local farms. Despite how well the herd or crops are maintained, family farms are influenced by choices made thousands of miles away.

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