Food, Faith and Farming Network
Connecting Community, Land, and People

Challenges for Wisconsin Farmers and Agriculture
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Wisconsin farm families face a number of challenges which make farming more difficult now than it was a few years ago. Let's reflect on some of these challenges.

The Elephant in the Room

The biggest long-term issue facing agriculture in Wisconsin is the transition of land and other resources to the next generation of Wisconsin farmers. This came through loud and clear in a series of Rural Listening/Networking sessions our Food, Faith and Farming Network sponsored in southwest Wisconsin early in 2018. Issues that flowed out of these sessions included: transitioning farms from older farmers to the next generation, providing young farmers with access to land and other resources, providing mentors to new/young farmers, supporting farmers markets and local food systems, and fostering sustainable and regenerative agriculture in Wisconsin. Our Seed Money grants for the past eight years have focused on these issues as well as broader rural community development issues.

The issue of transitioning land and other resources to the next generation of Wisconsin farmers was also the subject of a September 1, 2026 feature article in the Wisconsin State Journal. They put the issue bluntly: "As older farmers look to retire, millions of acres will change hands in the coming decades." Adam D'Angelo, a young farmer who was able to get into farming with help from Groundswell Conservancy and American Farmland Trust, was quoted as saying; "If we don't steward this land transfer, it's going to go to corporations, and speculators and developers." The article goes on to point out that beginning farmers are rarer in Wisconsin than elsewhere in our country: "In 2022…just one in eight Wisconsin producers were beginners, meaning they had worked for five years or less on any (farm) operation."

There are several reasons for the lack of new and beginning farmers in our state: 1) The financial challenges associated with farming have been significant and, thus, many farm parents have not encouraged their kids to carry on the farming tradition, 2) There may not be enough equity in the farming operation to support retirement of the parents while also fostering the farming career of their kids, 3) the transfer of a farm from current owners to their kids or

others interested in farming are complex, requiring financial and legal advice, and 4) non-farm young people simply don't have the finances to purchase land, buildings, machinery and other resources to enter farming.

The lack of new and beginning farmers has produced dramatic changes in Wisconsin's agricultural situation. In the words of the Wisconsin State Journal article: "In 1975, there were five times as many farms in the state as there were in 2025, according to the USDA Census of Agriculture survey. But, as the number of operations has shrunk, the average size of each has grown and the number of cattle housed on farms with 500 head or more increased fourfold from 1997 to 2022." More will be said about the future of agriculture in the final section of this paper.

Tariffs and the War in Iran

The biggest shorter-term issue for farmers and agriculture in Wisconsin are the dramatically escalating costs associated with tariffs and the war in Iran. A Dodgeville area farmer commented that the cost of every input—fuel, fertilizer, seeds, pesticides, new machinery, machine repairs, cattle--has gone up dramatically in the last two years. He gave an example of a pin he needed for the hydraulic system on his machinery: the cost had jumped from $20 a few years ago to $120 just recently. Diesel fuel, the primary fuel used for farm equipment, has gone up $2.00 per gallon recently, escalating farm costs especially during planting and harvesting seasons.

The escalating costs associated with farming have not been offset by increases in the value of farm products sold. Thus, the financial margins for most Wisconsin farmers have shrunk dramatically in the past year.

The Dairy Farm Situation

For decades, Wisconsin has been known as "America's Dairyland;" in fact, our license plates proudly make this claim. Yet, Wisconsin is losing dairy farms at an alarming rate. We had about 180,000 dairy farms in our state during the peak in 1935, but that number dwindled to around 39,000 during the "farm crisis" of the mid-1980s and is below 5,500 today. We were losing about 500 dairy farms a year during the period from 2010 to 2020! It's largely a matter of economics: the pay price for milk just hasn't offset the rapidly escalating costs of farm expenses, including seed, fertilizer, fuel, pesticides, machinery, cattle and land. Most of these expenses are dramatically higher today than they were ten years ago. Yet there have also been dramatic changes in technology (breeding, herd health, milking equipment, feeding, and manure handling) as well as changes in labor and labor management that have increased costs for farm families and made it difficult for many small and mid-size farms to survive.

The pay price for milk has frequently fallen below the cost of production for dairy farmers, considered to be $20-$25 per hundredweight, depending on whether the farm has a mortgage and/or high levels of debt. The underlying problem is an imbalance between our supply of milk, the demand for milk and milk products and the perishability of dairy products. Milk production per cow has more than doubled since 1970 due to genetics, better feeding and better management; our herd averages are now around 25,000 pounds of milk per cow per year. In addition, the average

number of cows per herd has grown to 226 and the number of CAFOS (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations with over 1,000 cows) has more than doubled from 146 in 2005 to over 327 today. We need to recognize that there are no real disincentives for producing more milk. Thus, when prices are low, farmers tend to seek more income by producing more milk and when prices rise, they tend to produce more milk to capture the higher prices.

There are at least four recent initiatives aimed at improving the imbalance between the supply of milk and the demand for milk and milk products in Wisconsin. These can be briefly summarized as follows:

1) Mark Stephenson, head of UW-Madison's Center for Dairy Profitability, led a Wisconsin Dairy Task Force to come up with recommendations "to maintain a viable and profitable dairy industry in Wisconsin." The group proposed 51 recommendations to strengthen our dairy industry, from "Recognizing the importance of exports" to "Increasing demand for fluid milk consumption in schools" to "Creating a UW Dairy Innovation Hub."
2) The Wisconsin Legislature voted to create a Dairy Innovation Hub that would promote university-based research and development projects at UW-Madison, UW-River Falls and UW-Platteville. Wisconsin is now supporting the Dairy Innovation Hub on these three UW campuses with nearly $8 million in funding annually.
3) The Wisconsin Farmers Union, in partnership with the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Organization, has launched a "Dairy Together" initiative that is creating a nation-wide coalition of dairy farmers in support of a milk supply management policy as part of a future Farm Bill. Dairy farmers and their allies will need to speak with a unified voice if the Dairy Together initiative is to be incorporated in a future Farm Bill.
4) Milk exports have been a theme in recent years. Interestingly, an October 2024 article in the *Wisconsin Agriculturalist* highlighted the fact that 16-18% of the U.S. milk supply is now exported annually, primarily through manufactured products, including cheese, butter, whey, yogurt, ice cream and non-fat dry milk. Several new dairy processing plants are being built across the U.S., so processing milk into cheese, butter and other milk products may be easier in the future. The key question is whether the balance between milk supply and milk product demand will be resolved.

Other Agricultural Enterprises

When I started out as a Vocational Agriculture instructor in Darlington, WI in 1967, I couldn't drive anywhere in southwest Wisconsin or other parts of the state without seeing dairy cattle out on pasture with most farms. Now, it's becoming rare to see dairy cattle out on pasture since many of our dairy farms have disappeared and large numbers of dairy farms are CAFOS where cattle are kept inside rather than out on pasture. A more common sight these days is beef cattle or heifers out on pasture and large acreages of corn and soybeans. So, a huge transition has occurred during my lifetime, partially because of the thin margins in dairy and because farmers don't want to be tied to milking cows two or three times a day.

Beef farmers have done well over the past couple of years due to greatly reduced animal numbers. But the recent announcement related to importation of beef from south of our border has beef farmers up in arms; it's likely to lower the price of beef and slow the rebuilding of beef herds that is so important for balancing the supply and demand for beef. Unfortunately, the margins have been thin for hog, corn and soybean farmers so many have been struggling financially. One of the biggest challenges is the erratic nature of commodity prices. Taking corn as an example, Wisconsin farmers received an average of $6.11 a bushel for their corn in 2022 but only $4.40 a bushel for their corn in 2023; that's a 28% reduction in corn prices in one year while expenses for seed, fertilizer, pesticides and fuel continued to escalate. Grain farmers with good storage and hauling options do have an advantage over dairy farmers since their product is considerably less perishable and, thus, can be stored in the hope of better prices.

We need to recognize that Wisconsin's agriculture is very diverse and includes: vegetables (potatoes, asparagus and other canning veggies), fruit (cranberries, apples, cherries, strawberries), poultry (chickens, turkeys, ducks), honey and sorghum, and direct marketing of meat and vegetable products to consumers. Most of these enterprises have faced their own challenges; an example being the recent bird flu epidemic affecting poultry producers and dairy farmers.

Lack of Investments

Because margins have been thin and, in many cases, non-existent, many Wisconsin farmers have not been making regular investments in their farming operations. As a result, many are farming with decades-old farm machinery, with tractors that don't have Roll-Over-Protective Structures (ROPS) and with machinery that lacks appropriate guards for power take-off shafts. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics considers farming to be the most dangerous job in America with 23 deaths per 100,000 workers. The job becomes even more dangerous without ROPS on tractors and appropriate guards for power take-off shafts. Investments in farm buildings have also suffered during this tight economic situation. Farm productivity, efficiency and safety are dependent on regular investments and modernization of buildings, other farming facilities and technology.

Climate Impacts

Climate issues have a dramatic impact on farmers. 2019 was declared the wettest year in recorded climate history in Wisconsin. This made it difficult for farmers to get their crops planted in the spring and harvest their crops in the summer and fall; it created major shortages of hay during the winter of 2019-20. The last few years have been extremely variable with severe drought in the summer of 2023, excessive rains in the spring of 2024 and excessive rain and heat in 2025 and 2026. Both drought **and** excessive rain have impacts on crop production, and both create emotional turmoil for farmers since they have little control over climate issues. While Federal crop insurance is available for many crops, not all farmers want to expend the additional capital and insurance payouts, when they do occur, are often meager in relation to the actual crop losses.

Livestock Siting Regulations

A statewide livestock siting law was passed in 2004 to provide uniform regulations for new and expanding livestock facilities. Recent changes have updated the regulations for manure storage facilities, runoff from animal feeding lots and animal odors. These changes have been controversial. The Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, along with other conservation groups and citizens, argued that the standards are critical to ensure farms are managed responsibly and in ways that protect water and air quality. The Dairy Business Association, Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce have argued that the changes are unfair, largely unworkable, and can prevent expansion of dairy herds in Wisconsin. These livestock siting regulations are designed to protect our precious air and water resources, yet they are likely to be lightning rods for debate into the future.

Manure and Water Quality

On the issue of CAFOs and manure, it's clear that the liquid manure used in huge animal operations presents a threat to water quality, especially in the central sands area of Wisconsin and in areas where karst (semi-permeable limestone) is the bedrock underlying soil. Karst geology underlies much of southern Wisconsin, extending in a U shape along the western side of our state as far north as Polk County, along our southern border, and along the eastern side as far north as Marinette and Door Counties. Liquid manure can leach through sand and karst into the ground water below, thus contaminating the water table with nitrates and coliform bacteria. This has been most evident in Kewaunee County where karst is the underlying bedrock and there are large numbers of CAFOS with cattle outnumbering people 5:1; more than 60% of wells sampled in Kewaunee County were contaminated with nitrates and/or coliform bacteria. Recent studies also show that 60% of private wells in Iowa, Grant and Lafayette Counties are contaminated. The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism found that manure contamination is a public health problem for over 100,000 families in our state. Our Wisconsin DNR is responsible for licensing and monitoring CAFOS; it is a tough job since there are pressures from farmers, industry groups, environmental groups and citizens…each with their own agendas regarding air and water quality.

Topsoil Issues

Midwestern studies show that topsoil is eroding ten times faster than new soil can be formed. And erosion rates in Wisconsin routinely run at double the rate of national topsoil loss, due to our hilly topography, intensive tilling practices and more frequent heavy rains. Agricultural experts advocate strip cropping, no or low-till farming practices, use of cover crops and rotational grazing to anchor soil in place and rebuild soil health. Many agricultural field days now demonstrate soil loss due to heavy rains under varying soil conditions: conventional tillage, no-till farming practices, pastureland, soil with cover crops, and soil with prairie plants.

Farmers can see, first-hand, how no-till methods, rotational grazing, use of cover crops and use of prairie plants dramatically reduce soil loss during heavy rain events. Fields of Sinsinawa, a farmer-led learning

center in far southwestern Wisconsin, advocates the use of "Five Soil Care Principles:" 1) minimal disturbance of the soil; 2) keep living roots in the soil all year long; 3) increase plant diversity with grasses and broadleaf plants; 4) integrate livestock into the farming operation; and 5) protect soil from the wind, rain and sun. Farmers using these principles can retain and rebuild their soils. These principles will spread farmer-to-farmer, but they are not universal now.

Access to High-Speed Internet in Rural Areas

Over 25% of rural residents lack access to high-speed internet and this limits opportunities for equal participation in our modern, internet-driven world. This became especially apparent during Covid 19 when large numbers of rural residents were working/schooling from home, and the limits of their internet were severely tested. Farmers are impacted in powerful ways since many of their inputs now need to be ordered online from machinery dealers located quite some distance from their farms. This was another issue raised at our FFFN Rural Listening and Networking sessions. Fortunately, state resources are being channeled into providing high-speed internet into the far reaches of our state.

Access to Food in Rural Communities

Another significant issue raised in our FFFN Rural Listening and Networking sessions was "The existence of food deserts in small, rural communities." We usually think of food deserts as an urban issue, but we learned that Richland County only has one grocery store—a Walmart Supercenter—in the entire county. In many counties, rural residents must travel great distances to purchase food at large chain grocery stores in urban areas or accept the food options available at Dollar stores or "quick marts" affiliated with local gas stations. Thus, another significant issue raised in Rural Listening and Networking sessions—"Granting local farmers access to local food markets"—is such an important issue for local farmers as well as for consumers in small, rural communities. Our Seed Money initiative has been supporting Farmers Markets in various parts of the state to aid local farmers and offer local and sustainably produced food in rural communities.

Mental Health/Wellness Initiatives

The many challenges associated with farming have triggered depression and suicidal thoughts in many Wisconsin farm families as well as initiatives to respond to these mental health issues. The Southwest Community Action Program is providing a farmer wellness and suicide prevention service in southwest Wisconsin (FarmWell, WI), offering counseling and peer support services for farm families in that area of the state. The Farmer Angel Network is offering educational and peer support to farm families in southwestern Wisconsin, aimed at enhancing farmer well-being and preventing farm suicides. Both initiatives have received Seed Money grants from our Food, Faith and Farming Network to support their important work. Another statewide resource is available to farm families as well. The Wisconsin Farm Center within the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection offers professional mental health counseling services through their

24/7 Farmer Wellness Hotline; they also offer tele-counseling, counseling vouchers and farmer peer support groups.

The Future of Farming in Wisconsin

Given the number of challenges facing Wisconsin farm families, why do farmers continue to farm and where will the next generation of farmers come from? Farmers continue to farm for several reasons: there is a pride and independence associated with farming; farmers are their own bosses, not beholden to others; there is a love of the land and the pride of being the fourth or fifth generation of farmers on their land; there is a love of working with their hands in the outdoors, experiencing sunrises and sunsets as well as sorely needed rains; there is a desire to see their kids grow up in the natural world and take on added responsibilities as they grow older; and there is the love of experiencing new life with each new crop in the spring and each new animal born on the farm. With these largely intangible benefits, we are likely to see many Wisconsin farmers continue to farm.

Yet we need to recognize that many Wisconsin farms are staying afloat due to off-farm employment. Employment off the farm has been common for many years, often as a source of health insurance for farm families. Still, Wisconsin farm families have become increasingly dependent on off-farm income. A USDA Agricultural Resource Management Survey found that, in the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, 79.3% of Wisconsin farm family income came from off-farm sources. This was especially true for small to mid-size farms. This is an incredibly shocking statistic, and it raises questions about the viability of small to mid-sized farms in our state!

We will need to find ways of encouraging new people to enter the field of agriculture: new farmers with access to land and other resources and with knowledgeable people to help mentor them in successful agricultural techniques. Groundswell Conservancy and the American Farmland Trust are trying to help with this issue by buying land from retiring farmers, placing it in “conservation easements” to protect it for agricultural purposes, and selling it to young farmers at greatly reduced prices. While these arrangements offer wonderful opportunities for young and beginning farmers, they will cover just a fraction of the agricultural land that will be coming on the market over the next two decades.

It would be helpful if state and/or federal resources could be allocated to this cause of transitioning farmland to younger farmers. But, in the absence of such resources, existing farmers will need to work at transitioning their farms to family or non-family members who share an interest in and commitment to farming. The University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection offer resources for helping with farm transitions in our state. Farm transitions are complex; Wisconsin farm families need to be aware of these resources and tap into them if we are to see successful farm transitions in the state!