



The Future of Family Farms

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I am an Iowa farm girl.

I grew up on a second-generation family dairy farm nestled in the rolling green hills of northeast Iowa. It was an upbringing I treasure: the steady rhythm of planting in the spring and harvesting in the fall, the deep connection to the land and animals, the value placed on honest, hard work. It's where I learned the importance of collective effort for a common cause, recognizing that doing my small part alongside other family members was essential to our livelihood.

Faith was also central to growing up on our family farm, with a keen awareness that our way of life was intimately connected to God's bountiful creation and our faithful stewardship of it. A picture that hung on the wall just above our family's kitchen table, stitched by the arthritic hands of my paternal grandmother, summed it up one way: "He who plants a seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God."

Today, my niece and her husband and children are the farmers in the family. I marvel at their extraordinary work ethic and give thanks for the pride they take in their perfectly maintained fields, beautiful property, and careful protection of the land. But I also worry about them, because I know that family farms are disappearing and the business of small-scale farming is increasingly challenging. According to the National Family Farm Coalition, the number of family farm bankruptcies hit a six-year high in April of this year.



The reasons are many. The constant see-saw of tariffs during this Trump administration has created an unpredictability in the market that has been devastating for farmers. Input costs like diesel fuel and nitrogen-based fertilizer are at historically high levels, driven there in part by our war on Iran and the volatility of the Strait of Hormuz. While expenses continue to rise, income has declined due to low commodity prices. The steep cost of health insurance is another stressor for farm families, no minor consideration given that farming is one of the most hazardous professions. Climate change also contributes to the difficulty, driving extreme weather patterns that upset the delicate balance of the growth cycle and contribute to livestock stress. As farm families face all these deepening challenges, their mental health is also a concern; according to the National Rural Health Association, the suicide rate among farmers is now 3.5 times higher than the national average.

In Congress, the current Farm Bill is due to expire at the end of this month. The Farm Bill typically tackles a wide range of complex issues, including nutrition assistance, crop insurance, conservation and commodities, and innovative programs that address everything from research to rural development to racial equity. Given the deep divides in Congress, significant differences exist about what a new Farm Bill should look like. This much is clear: we need fresh, comprehensive strategies to address the struggles that farm families and rural communities are facing today.

I left our small Iowa town and the family farm there decades ago, lured away like many young people by a professional path that led me to other places and pursuits. But that place and that way of life still reside deep in my marrow, and my respect for those who remain there is immense. We need family farms to survive and flourish in this country, for the sake of our world's food supply and the wellbeing of rural communities who deserve our attention and care.

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