

# Farm Crisis

*Is there a future for family farms, and do we have a moral obligation to save them?*

*Story & photos by Janet Mayer*

**"J**ohn" knows the pleasure of picking apples from trees his great-grandfather planted in the orchard many years ago, and he enjoys following in the footsteps of the family members who worked this farm before him. The worn, horse-drawn plow of yesteryear sits in weathered neglect beside the equally weathered equipment shed where the old blacksmithing tools are still kept. But the modern world of two large tractors and assorted machinery stand in readiness nearby.

As the fourth generation to live and to work on his family's farm, this solemn, 33-year-old man is obviously saddened by having made the decision to quit the cattle business he has been operating with his father for the past nine years.

"My wife and I have a new baby, and we just get by on what I make on the farm and what she earns working in a bakery," he says. "There are not nearly enough hours in the day, and money is so scant we finally applied for a medical card and heat assistance. It was embarrassing, especially since I have an agricultural degree from college and could earn a decent income in my field if I left this part of the state. Farming is just not a big industry in this area anymore."

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*Family business*





The Farm Crisis is a real and chronic situation that is causing the loss of many family farms and untold suffering for the people and rural communities involved.

*"Agriculture needs to find ways to compete for the hearts and minds of young people."*

*—Lynn Cornwell  
vice president, NCBA*

He spent several years away from home, first at school, then working at two other cattle operations. Ultimately he was drawn back to the farm and the profession he loved.

"We would like to build a home in a couple of years, but I can't see having the money to do it, nor do I want to continue along this same path the remainder of my life," he adds. "I love it here, but I simply can't afford this way of life.

"My dad has decided to retire so, of course, the cattle will be gone, but at least our family will still own the farm. There will be two less farmers, but maybe somewhere down the line, another generation will pick up where we left off. I hope so."

#### **The farm crisis is real**

Once family farms provided home and livelihood to the American majority. Now they constitute a minority struggling just to survive.

The situation of our nation's farms, most generally referred to as "The Farm Crisis," is a real and

chronic situation that is causing the loss of many family farms and untold suffering for the people and rural communities involved.

How, you may wonder, can any farm be struggling when technology and science have made the United States the most productive agricultural country in the world? Don't statistics show that we produce 16% of the world's food supply? How can 4.6 million people involved with the operation of 2 million U.S. farms, averaging about 478 acres each, be in a crisis when each of those farmers is producing enough food and fiber for 129 people?

Well, the farm crisis is here — alive and kicking. The demise of smaller farms is a viable subject of the news media, which seem to place much of the blame on the industrialization of agriculture and the larger corporate farm.

However, many reports say it would be more accurate to call this situation a crisis for the farmers themselves, since recent surveys show a continuing

trend toward fewer and larger farms with the number of farmers going down every time the average farm size increases.

One news report stated the main difference in farming of the past and what the future seems to hold will be the number of those who toil in the fields and the size of those fields. While technology has advanced farming practices, only in this century has it replaced sizeable chunks of actual farmland and the number of farmers.

An article written by former Texas Commissioner of Agriculture Jim Hightower attributed many of the financial problems facing family farmers to being squeezed from either side by big business. On one side are the input suppliers who sell necessities, such as land, machinery, seed, fertilizers, pesticides and feed. Squeezing from the other side are the output corporations that process, market and retail products. The result is an increase of only 6% since 1952 in prices received by farmers for their products, while overhead has risen 122%.

A recent advertisement placed in major newspapers by groups supporting the perpetuation of family farms proclaimed "farming was once the most diversified and democratic economic sector in America but today has become among the most narrowly concentrated and anti-competitive with a handful of giant corporate agribusinesses squeezing the life from our family farms."

In addressing the plight of the small farm, John Ikerd, professor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU) and coordinator of the Sustainable Agricultural Systems Program, reports there is a continuing trend toward fewer and larger

farms as shown in the 1997 Census of Agriculture. Total farm numbers were reported to be down less than 1% from 1992; however, farmers who consider farming their principal occupation dropped nearly 9% from 1992.

For years, Ikerd says, he believed and tried to live by the creed of the Future Farmers of America (now the FFA) that, when he learned it, began with the words "I believe in the future of farming with a faith born not of words, but of deeds."

"Now I simply can no longer believe it is true," he says. "There is no future of farming — at least not of farming as we have known it — not if the dominant trends of today continue into the future. Every time the size of the average farm goes up, the number of farmers goes down. Every time a farmer signs a corporate production contract, an independent farmer becomes a corporate hired hand. As farms grow larger and fewer, the future of farming grows ever dimmer."

The takeover by large corporate farms is not the only threat to the future of the family farm. In many states where urban development threatens to consume these smaller operations, farmland is being preserved by purchasing easement rights to restrict future development.

Pennsylvania has initiated a statewide program, committing \$100 million over the next five years, to keep the best, tillable soil in production and to relegate housing and business development.

Commenting on the progress of the programs, Gov. Tom Ridge recently remarked that Pennsylvanians are proud to be part of our nation's breadbasket. "Just as agriculture was the lifeblood of our state's past, it is also the key to a prosperous future. Our farmers

must always be the defining characteristic of Pennsylvania's landscape.

"It's a compelling acknowledgement of the basic truth that our environment is not inherited from our parents but borrowed from our children, and agriculture is inescapably entwined with our environment."

In response to the preservation program, one of the state's daily publications raised this point: "The real question is whether farming will continue to be a viable enough enterprise to keep farms from being developed for other uses. It doesn't make sense to buy up the rights to farmland if there will not be anyone willing to do the work."

In essence they might well be asking if the younger generation of these families will continue to farm, or will preserved farmland lay fallow, growing up in weeds while the next generation pursues careers that offer shorter hours and more pay?

### Addressing the problem

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and its vice president, Lynn Cornwell, are asking that same question and taking an active role in encouraging young people in agriculture.

This past November, Cornwell testified before a joint hearing of U.S. House small-business subcommittees, bringing to light many obstacles standing in the way of attracting youth to the industry.

"There is no clear-cut solution to enable and encourage young people to get involved in production agriculture," he said. "It has gotten to a point in which you need a permit or license to do almost anything. Kids see Dad going to public hearings just to protect what he has — forget trying to expand."



As a cattle producer from Glasgow, Mont., Cornwell cautioned that complying with federal and state regulations and enticing career opportunities off the farm are encouraging young people into fields other than agriculture.

"The federal government could encourage more young people to go into agriculture by repealing the death tax and reforming environmental regulations that place a financial strain on cattlemen and -women," he said. "As farm and ranch kids finish their education, they think, 'Why would I want to return to a lifestyle that requires me to work 16 to 20 hours a day to effectively earn \$1,000 per month?'"

"Agriculture needs to find

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Even if farmland can be protected from urban development and corporate farming, there may not be enough of an economic incentive to keep the next generation on the farm.

## One less farm

"Wayne" always has found a quiet sense of belonging and a joy of spending time in the barn where he now stands, looking to the herd of heifers grazing nearby. He loves to tell the story of how this huge bank barn, originally built on a farm several miles away, was torn down in the late 1880s and moved by horses and wagons to its present site. The hand-hued beams of wormy chestnut were put back together with the original pegs, and the structure stands solid to this day, greeting visitors with the ever-present scent of hay, grain and cattle that seems to permeate every corner.

Partners with his 74-year-old father in a calf-to-finish operation, both have seen hard times on the farm that has been worked by five generations of the family over the last 132 years.

But now both have agreed, with government bailouts, ever-encroaching development, competition from larger corporate farms and an ever-expanding debt, it is time to bail out. There are no other family members to take over the farm, and it will be sold.

With his 41st birthday just a week away, he has decided it is time to make a break from farming. He will return to a steady paycheck and the teaching career he abandoned some 17 years ago to return to farming. His father and mother will be moving to a nearby retirement community.

"This past year, we sold custom-slaughtered mixed quarters and halves of beef for \$1.35 a pound," he points out. "This is just 25¢ over what my dad sold a hind quarter of beef for in 1980.

"Now we sure don't pay the same price for seed, fertilizer, minerals and machinery as he did back in 1980, so what kind of profit are we seeing?"

"So what can we do? Go up, or go out? Expand the operation to sell more, change what we produce, or sell the farm to the developers who keep calling us, and live our lives in relative ease without owing money to everyone? I have always considered farming something of a gamble, but when you get into debt just trying to succeed, it is time to get out."

ways to compete for the hearts and minds of young people," Cornwell concluded. "While the federal government can't solve all these problems, it can ease the burdens on America's agriculture producers."

The NCBA is not the only group looking to the future of farming. Politicians ponder the plight of family farms and urge government intervention, while other groups take action in a different way.

The Turning Point Project, a nonprofit organization formed to produce a series of educational advertisements concerning major issues of the new millennium, has joined forces with Farm Aid, the National Family Farm Coalition and the Land Institute to make the public aware of the situation.

## Room for optimism

The future for family farms, however, is not all bleak, says Michael Harteis, a Pennsylvania State University Extension farm management agent and fourth-generation farmer. "I am optimistic about the future of farming in general and think there will always be a place for family farms in this country."

Specializing in the financial end of farming, Harteis works with farmers through workshops and on an individual basis, giving advice

on financial issues, recordkeeping, computer programs and the fringes of forest-labor management.

Most small farms have the ability to survive if managed properly, Harteis says. "This means making changes where necessary and being able to handle the labor themselves. Of course, economics definitely dictate whether you are able to hold onto the farm or if you need to sell it for income to live on, a problem some of the older farmers encounter."

Harteis says he does not see a lot of farmers going out of business in his area of Pennsylvania, which covers three counties in the west-central part of the state. Instead, many are changing their operations to fit the times. Most change to be more efficient or enlarge to take additional members of the family into the farm.

Will he ever go back to making his living solely from his family's farm?

"I can't see that happening," he says. "But I do know that the farm will stay in our family. Maybe it won't be a dairy operation anymore. Instead we might just grow crops, but it will stay in our family. I have found most farm families love what they are doing, and if they have a passion and commitment for that way of life, then the family farm will survive."

Harteis agrees with other farmers who have said they feel a certain duty to future generations and an obligation to preserve the fertility of soil and the purity of air and water by keeping their family farms in operation. And the family farm would seem to be the reasonable arrangement for meeting these obligations since each generation will have a stronger motive in adopting conservation practices for future generations.

Don Mayer, an Angus breeder and owner of a family farm, has been actively practicing conservation and considers himself to be a steward of the land and a keeper of his animals. He says he has a love for the land and the life his family leads.

Born in the big farmhouse on the family farm where he still lives, he has followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather who worked the land before him.

"This farm is a relationship between our family, past and future generations," he says. "Knowing how to farm your land is a knowledge of the heart, not the head. It can't be learned from a book but is best passed from generation to generation through experience and memories.

"I hope someone in our family will farm this land after I am gone, but I know the chance of that happening grows slimmer each year. Many family farms are being sold, and to survive most would have to make radical changes just to stay afloat. But do we have a moral obligation to preserve this farm? And do other farmers also have that obligation?" he queries. "I would have to say 'yes.' To allow the family farms to slip through our fingers would be a tragedy.

"Even for those farmers who may admit they never truly loved their land or their job, all would have to agree a good farmer cares for his or her land and, in the end, to lose that land is like losing part of their very existence and heritage."

**Editor's note:** *The two farmers in the story and sidebar whose pseudonyms appear in quotation marks are real, but under the circumstances they wish to remain anonymous.*

