Robin Fitch’s husband has been a dairy farmer since 1976; the family has been milking 175 cows near Cooperstown, New York, for the last ten years. Her 25-year-old son, Justin, is desperate to take over: “It’s the only thing he wants to do,” she says. It’s unlikely that he will get that chance, because the family is seriously considering getting out of the business. Their days start at 4 a.m. for milking and chores, and she has two part-time jobs, but the family is only barely making ends meet.

Gretchen Maine, who lives nearby in Waterville, New York, got out in 2015. She was undergoing treatment for kidney cancer, leaving her 77-year-old husband milking cows alone. Looking at the direction milk prices were going, the couple decided to sell their hundred cows and get out of dairy farming. “It was a hard decision,” Maine says, “but it was the only decision. With the price of milk going to crash, there was just no sensible reason to keep on going.”

Over 47,000 dairy farms have closed down or consolidated since 2000. Milk production has not slowed; it is being produced on fewer larger farms.

Fourth-generation Wisconsin farmer Joel Greeno sold his 80 cows in 2013. Eighteen months later, milk prices hit a record high. At the time he sold the cows, Greeno says, “prices weren’t the worst, but they still weren’t good.” He was recovering from emergency surgery and would have had to buy additional animals in order to financially stabilize the farm; the family was wary of the volatility of the dairy market. The family was looking for going into debt on a future as uncertain as dairy farming and decided to get out. He sold some of the cows for half of what he had paid, and says if he had waited six months, both milk and cattle prices increased so much that he could have gotten three times that, “but that’s the volatility of the dairy market.”

47,000 Farms Closed Down
In rural areas, you don’t have to look far to find these stories. Over 47,000 dairy farms have closed down or consolidated since 2000. Milk production has not slowed; it is being produced on fewer larger farms. In 1997, US farmers were milking 9.1 million cows on 125,000 farms; by 2012, there were nearly 9.3 million dairy cows on just 64,000 farms. Like many industries, dairy farms benefit from economies of scale: larger operations are more economically efficient in terms of equipment, labor, and other resources. However, large dairy operations also externalize many of their costs, drawing excessive water with manure disposal and consolidating wealth from the community rather than supporting a wide network of thriving businesses.

The Maze of Milk Pricing
In dairy, as most farming sectors, there is enormous pressure to “get big or get out,” echoing the directives of Richard Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. The pressure for small farmers like Fitch, Maine and Greeno is felt in their balance sheets and wallets every day, and it’s getting worse: nationally, the price farmers receive for milk has fallen nearly thirty-five percent since a high in September 2014, from $26 to $17 per hundredweight (about twelve gallons). For the average small farmer milking under 200 cows, a hundred weight of milk costs around $22 to produce; not even including their own labor. That’s a loss to the farmer of five dollars with every twelve gallons that leave the farm. Continued pg 9