

# Project Tractor

By: Anthony Pahnke, FFD Vice President

Ten years have passed since Project Tractor was launched. It would be an injustice to the effort to describe it merely as a shipment of tractors, farm equipment, food, and medical supplies from Wisconsin to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav. Project Tractor was more than just moving stuff from one place to another. The initiative, at its core, was about connecting communities, building solidarity, and creating hope, particularly at a time when many were suffering in the aftermath of one this country's worst natural disasters.

I became active in the Family Farm Defenders a few years after Project Tractor began. Where I actually first heard of the effort was from farmers in Mississippi, when I was visiting folks there in 2012. At that time, a friend of mine and I went on a road trip, meeting different farm groups. We ended up at Ben Burkett's farm outside of Petal, Mississippi, where we met a few members of the Indian Springs Cooperative. When they asked where I was from, and I told them that I was from Wisconsin, one farmer said, "Well, thank you."

Folks from Wisconsin are welcome here any time." I was pleasantly surprised by that simple act of kindness, later finding out that the reason for the gratitude was the tireless actions of dozens, if not hundreds of volunteers who made Project Tractor a reality.

I returned to Mississippi a few years later in 2016 to talk more with Ben Burkett and others about farming and cooperatives. The event was the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives' agricultural symposium, which is the group's mid-year mem-



The Original "Project Tractor" Tractor

bership meeting. Of course, after some members of the Association found out that I was from Wisconsin, Project Tractor came up in the conversation.

As Ben told me, "it was right after Katrina when John Kinsman called me and asked what he could do to help." When I asked about what happened to the tractors, Ben said, "those tractors, they are still on the job. And when farmers in Louisiana heard that we got some, they wanted some too." At the time, I didn't know that Project Tractor had two moments - one in 2006, and the second, in 2009, when a second shipment of tractors went to farmers in Louisiana who were reeling from the destruction caused by Hurricane Gustav.

Ben added that "without them tractors, the recovery would have been way harder," but with the most important result of the effort being "the farmer to farmer relationships." And that relationship runs deep for Ben, as he said, "Family Farm

Defenders is part of me, always will be." After the event, I again went to Ben's farm, where he showed me one of the original Project Tractor tractors.

The news coverage and some of the testimonies from the volunteers who were involved at the time add another layer to Project Tractor. For instance, nearly every picture that appeared in newspapers that covered the shipment features people smiling - both the folks receiving and giving the tractors, equipment, and supplies. One picture that appeared in the Hattiesburg American shows John Peck and John Kinsman laughing and hugging Ben Burkett's daughter, Darnella, with the flatbed trailer used to deliver the tractors in the background. Another photo, in the Spring 2006 edition of The Defender Newsletter, shows Randy Jaspers smiling while delivering supplies to farmers in New Orleans. (Randy, it is worth-noting, drove the tractor shipments for Project Tractor, not for one trip, but for both!)

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Ben Burkett - 4th Generation Farmer - His Family Farm has been in Petal, Mississippi since 1886

Seeing the joy in these photos speaks to the hope that Project Tractor inspired. And hope was in short supply those days, especially after the federal government's extraordinarily slow response. Some of the testimonies of Wisconsin volunteers note that in some places it took the government weeks to send officials. Ben Burkett said that the first government aid worker that he saw arrived 35 days after Hurricane Katrina had ravaged his area. Another account about the government response documented how a sheriff from around Hattiesburg, Mississippi, after receiving no help for close to two weeks, had to break into a military base to get water for people who were in need.

Project Tractor was key for rebuilding communities. Where the federal government wavered in providing support, farmers and community members went headlong into dedicating their time and resources. One volunteer, in another testimony, noted how his group passed through highway patrol officer checkpoints to arrive to Gulfport. In what was described as a 'war zone,' this area of southern Mississippi had seen just a

few visits from the Red Cross and the federal government. The group, noting that the people in the area needed serious support, created what became known as the New Waveland Café and Market, an initiative made up of community people, activists, and farmers. This experiment in community building provided both meals and medical attention to hurricane survivors for months.

Such community building efforts were remarkable for their diversity. Many of the people who made Project Tractor happen were Wisconsin farmers, young and old, who sent tractors and equipment to African-American farmers and Indigenous communities. Critics of the government's response, or lack thereof at the time, called attention to how people of color were disproportionately negatively affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav. Similar allegations of racism surround the Trump administration's bungled attempt to address the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

In a perfect world, natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina would never happen. Our world is far from perfect, with climate change making

extreme weather a constant. Every year, the question is not if a hurricane, tornado, or flood will ravage some community, but how many catastrophes will we have to endure.

In fact, as I am writing this, people from around Wisconsin are dealing with the latest string of tornadoes and floods that have destroyed their barns, homes, and roads. From Florida to California, and Wisconsin to Mississippi, natural disasters are becoming regular occurrences. As the government's response to Hurricane Maria indicates, it is most likely that community-to-community efforts like Project Tractor will have to be repeated, not just in the south, but nationally.

This is why it's best to say that Project Tractor began ten years ago, and really, did not end. Or rather, the kind of solidary and community-to-community efforts that folks created in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana is part of an ongoing struggle to keep rural people on the land and bring diverse groups together to create hope in the face of adversity.