A grass-based organic dairy farm bought my cows. I couldn’t watch them go. In June, I milked them for the last time, left the barn and let the truckers load them. A cop-out on my part? Perhaps, but being able to remember them as I last saw them, in my barn, chewing their cuds and waiting for pasture, is all I have left.

My retirement was mostly voluntary, Premature, but there is some solace in choosing. Unlike many dairy farmers, I didn’t retire bankrupt. But for my wife and me, having to sell our herd was a sign — of the economic death not just of rural America but also of a way of life. It is nothing short of heartbreaking to walk through our barn and know that those stalls will remain empty. Knowing that our losses reflect the greater damage inflicted on entire regions is worse.

When I started farming in 1979, the milk from 45 cows could pay the bills, cover new machinery and buildings, and allow us to live a decent life and start a family. My father had farmed through the Great Depression, and his advice — “Don’t borrow any more than you have to” — stuck with me and probably saved the farm many times over.

We survived the 1980s, when debt loads became impossible for many farmers and merely incredibly onerous for the lucky ones. Interest rates went up, export markets plummeted after a wheat embargo against the Soviet Union, oil prices soared, inflation skyrocketed and land prices began to collapse. More than 250,000 farms died that decade, and more than 900 farmers committed suicide in the upper Midwest alone.

Farmers felt the impact most directly, but there were few in rural communities who were untouched. All the businesses that depended on farm dollars watched as their incomes dried up and the tax base shrunk. Farm foreclosures meant fewer families and fewer kids, so schools were forced to close. The Main Street cafés and coffee shops — where farmers talked fixed prices, the weather and politics — shut down as well.

As devastating as the 1980s were for farmers, today’s crisis is worse. Ineffective government subsidies and insurance programs are worthless in the face of ongoing and ever-rising costs that oversupply (and tariffs certainly aren’t helping). The current glut of organic milk has caused a 30 percent decrease in the price I was paid for my milk over the past two years. The new farm bill, signed by President Trump on Thursday, provides modest relief for larger dairy farmers (it expands some subsidies, and farmers will be able to pay lower premiums to participate in a federal program that offers compensation when milk prices drop below a certain level), but farmers don’t want subsidies; all we ever asked for were fair prices.

So for many, this is little more than another PR stunt, and the loss of family farms will continue. This year, Wisconsin, where I live, had lost 382 dairy farms by August, last year the number at the same point was 283. The despair is palpable; suicide is a fact of life, though many farm suicides are listed as accidents.

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For 40 years, each spring brings our future in farming that much harder to picture. Getting credit as a small farmer is more difficult today. As prices continue to fall, increasing production and farm size is often the only way to survive. But there is just too much — too much milk, too much grain, too much livestock — so the situation is great for the processors who buy from the farm, but it will never give the farmers a fair price.

When family farms go under, the people leave and the buildings are often abandoned, but the land remains, often sold to the nearest land baron. Hillsides and meadows that were once grasslands for pasturing cattle become acre upon acre of corn- soybean agriculture. Farming becomes a business where it used to be a way of life. With acreages so large, owners use pesticides and chemical fertilizers to ensure the soil can hold an unsustainable rotation of plants upright, rather than caring for the soil as a living biotic community.

Dairy farming is dying. After 40 years, I’m done. Organic Dairy farmer from Wonewoc, WI and FFD board member Originally published in the Washington Post, Dec. 21st, 2018