

Dairy farming is dying. After 40 years, I'm done.

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After 40 years of dairy farming, I sold my herd of cows this summer. The herd had been in my family since 1904; I know all 45 cows by name. I couldn't find anyone who wanted to take over our farm — who would? Dairy farming is little more than hard work and possible economic suicide.

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 cud and waiting for pasture, is all I have left.



Two cows from Jim Goodman's former herd

My retirement was mostly voluntary. Premature, but there is some solace in having a choice. 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 shrank. Farm foreclosures meant fewer families and fewer kids, so schools were forced to close. The Main Street cafes and coffee shops — where farmers talked 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 plummeting prices and 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.

A farmer, I knew for many years, came home from town, folded his good clothes for the last time and killed himself. I saw no warning, though maybe others did.

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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 that the soil can hold an unsustainable rotation of plants upright, rather than caring for the soil as a living biotic community.

Those dairy farms that remain milk hundreds or thousands of cows, keeping them in huge barns and on concrete lots. The animals seldom, if ever, get the chance to set their hooves on what little grass is there. Pigs are raised indoors for their entire lives, never feeling the sun or rain or what it's like to roll in mud.

All the machinery has become bigger, noisier, and some days it runs around the clock. Manure from the mega-farms is hauled for miles in huge tanker trucks or pumped through irrigation lines onto crop fields. The smell, the flies and the airborne pathogens that go with it have effectively done away with much of the peaceful countryside I used to know.

What kind of determination does it take for someone young and hopeful to begin a life of farming in times like these? 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 — thanks to tightening export markets and declining domestic demand for dairy products. The situation is great for the processors who buy from the farmers, but it will never give the farmers a fair price.

With fewer farms, there are fewer

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foreclosures than in the 1980s. But watching your neighbor's farm and possessions being auctioned off is no more pleasant today than it was 30 years ago. Seeing a farm family look on as their life's work is sold off piece by piece; the cattle run through a corral, parading for the highest bid; tools, household goods and toys piled as “boxes of junk” and sold for a few dollars while the kids hide in the hay-mow crying — auctions are still too painful for me.

As I end my career as a farmer, I feel fortunate it lasted as long as it did. Some choices made long ago did keep me ahead of the curve, at least for a while. I always told people that 45 cows were enough for me, and being able to give them names rather than numbers and appreciate each one's unique nature was important. I remember Adel, who always found her way across the pasture for a good head scratch, and Lara, whose sandpaper tongue always found my face as I milked her.

Cows like these didn't fit into the “Get Big or Get Out” theory of farming that took over during the 1980s, so over the years, we needed to get better ideas or get out. By switching to organic production and direct marketing, we managed to make a decent living. We also found that this method

of farming required good environmental stewardship and direct involvement with our rural community. And, for almost 20 years, it worked.

But organic dairying has become a victim of its own success. It was profitable and thus fell victim to the “get big” model. Now, our business is dominated by large organic operations that are more factory than farm. It seems obvious that they simply cannot be following the U.S. Department of Agriculture's strict organic production standards (like pasturing cattle), rules that we smaller farmers see as common sense.

Although small organic farms pioneered the concept, organic certification has become something not meant for us — and a label that mega-farms co-opted and used to break us. When six dairy farms in Texas feed their thousands of cows a diet of organic grain and stored forage, with no discernible access to a blade of grass, they end up producing more milk than all 453 organic dairy farms in Wisconsin combined. Then they ship it north, undercutting our price. We can't make ends meet and are forced out of the business. We played by the rules, but we no longer have a level playing field.

Despite this, I hung on, but I couldn't continue milking cows indefinitely. Perhaps it's for the best. A few years before we sold our herd, we had to install huge fans in our barn — the summers were getting too hot for the cows to be out during the heat of the day. Climate change would have made our future in farming that much harder. We could have adapted, I think, but we ran out of time.

They say a farmer gets 40 chances. For 40 years, each spring brings another shot at getting it right, at succeeding or failing or something in between. If that were ever true, it isn't now. That's why, after my 40 chances, I'm done.