



Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation

Wisconsin Agriculture in Crisis

By Dale M. Beaty, WFBF Chief Administrative Officer



During the darkest days of World War II with Britain on the verge of defeat, Winston Churchill said, "When you are going through hell, keep going."

2018 will be engrained in the mind of Wisconsin farmers as the year to persevere. Many farmers are at a financial and mental breaking point because of a confluence of challenges which include four continuous years of declining farm income, anxiety over foreign trade negotiations, the lack of a workable federal immigration policy, and the absence of Mother Nature's cooperation. Few signs of improvement are predicted for 2019, especially for our state's dairy industry.

“**Sadly, Wisconsin leads the nation in Chapter 12 farm bankruptcy filings with 47 in 2018. Financial struggles and the prospect of losing their way of life has led to increased depression among farmers.**”

The average farmer's income has declined nearly 35 percent since 2013 according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While farmer income declines, input costs such as labor, energy, insurance, equipment, and maintenance continue to rise. Farmers continue to lose money and burn through their equity. Sadly, Wisconsin leads the nation in Chapter 12 farm bankruptcy filings with 47 in 2018. Financial struggles and the prospect of losing

their way of life has led to increased depression among farmers.

Many farmers support President **Donald Trump's** attempts to open foreign markets because they recognize free trade is very favorable to the agricultural economy in the long-term. However, in the short-term, farmers are bearing the brunt of trade disagreements because of retaliatory tariffs. It is unlikely China will agree to lower their tariffs anytime soon. The Trump administration is offering \$12 billion in farm aid to help ease the pain; however, those payments won't avert the current farm crisis. Farmers want trade, not government aid.

Wisconsin farmers need federal immigration reform to maintain a consistent and reliable workforce. Farmers want the Federal government to create an immigration system which allows them to legally employ foreign workers. This is important because there is a shortage of workers in Wisconsin, and very few Americans are willing to consistently do the manual labor required on farms.

In addition to the financial stress and anxiety over trade negotiations, farmers had to persevere through challenging weather this year to complete their harvest. During the summer, many farmers were gifted too much rain through severe storms, causing flooding and damaged crops. Mother Nature dealt farmers long stretches of windy, wet, and cold weather this fall which reduced crop quality and made it hard for farmers to get the crop out of the fields.

Wisconsin farmers are trying to pilot through this low-price time by investigating alternative revenues. Over the years, the uses of industrial hemp

have grown significantly and thanks to a pilot program, farmers are once again dabbling with the crop. There are thousands of uses and a \$700 million domestic market waiting to be filled by farmers. Whether it's a different crop, an on-farm store, agri-tourism or diversifying, our farmers are doing the best they can to navigate their businesses.

We all eat. Therefore, we all need to care about our farmers and agribusiness owners. What can you do during this difficult time for them?

1. Add more dairy and locally grown farm products to your family's diet.
2. Take part in the "10-gallon challenge" which benefits both dairy farmers and needy families. Call your local food pantry to see if they accept perishable items, then head to your local grocery store, buy ten gallons of milk and drop it off.
3. Consider becoming a Farm Bureau member. Farm Bureau is a non-profit organization of, by, and for farmers. Wisconsin Farm Bureau advocates on behalf of farmers at the county, state, and national levels. To become a member, visit wfbf.com/membership.

The agricultural industry is cyclical. With agriculture contributing more than \$88 billion to our state's economy, we need the cycle to head upward soon.

WFBF is the state's largest general farm organization, representing farms of all sizes, commodities, and management styles. There are nearly 47,000 members that belong to the Wisconsin Farm Bureau. Voting Farm Bureau members (farmers) annually set the policy the organization follows, and are involved in local, state and national affairs, making it a true grassroots organization.