

UNCERTAINTY IS HURTING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS, COUNTERMEASURES ARE DEVELOPING

By Dr. Mike Rosmann

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Agricultural producers in much of the US are frustrated by factors that affect their economic well-being: too much or too little precipitation, harvest weather that seems to change by the hour, government programs that promise much but change regularly or don't address root problems, markets--both domestic and foreign--that seem promising and then disappear, increased expenses related to tariffs, insecurity about what will happen politically, and threats of national and global recession. These pressures--and more--impact most farmers' economic and psychological well-being and amplify their uncertainty.

Despite their best efforts most farmers can do little to significantly alter most of these factors, which at their worst can make-or-break their continuation in farming. A good rule of thumb is that most producers can adjust to two stressors that occur simultaneously, but three or more may push them beyond their breaking point, both psychologically and economically.

Farm bankruptcy filings rose 13% from July 1st last year to June 30th this year, according to the most recent Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation quarterly report. Wisconsin had the greatest number of Chapter 12 farm bankruptcies during the 12-month period with 45, followed by Kansas with 39, Minnesota with 31, and then by Nebraska and California with 25 apiece.

Many farmers' equity is drawing down after five years of losses or marginal profits. Concerns about the well-being of farmers are garnering attention around the US, as illustrated by frequent news stories, conferences, and public events of all kinds.

During the past year many agricultural states and communities developed programs aimed at mitigating the stress agricultural producers are experiencing. I had the opportunity to participate in many of these events. Here are just a few of the activities that occurred, or are planned:

- Michigan State University has developed training programs for Extension staff and other persons who work with farmers to manage stress that is being used around the country and by the USDA; interested persons should contact the MSU Extension
- For the second year in a row the 2019 Farm-Aid concert was sold out within 12 hours after ticket sales began; the 36,000 people who attended the 4-day event were the most energized that I have witnessed since the 1980s
- Colorado State University is hosting a Colorado Farm and Ranch Stress Summit on December 3, 2019; persons outside of Colorado may attend: interested persons may contact the event organizer, Dr. Bob Fetsch at CSU (robert.fetsch@colostate.edu)
- Highly beneficial farm stress management forums have been held this year in New York, Indiana, Illinois, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota, to name but a few
- Programs will be held in North Carolina, Kansas, Iowa, Washington and many other locations yet this year or in early 2020; interested persons can undertake online searches with key words like "farm, ranch, stress, programs" and the name of their state
- More than a dozen experienced leaders whose work traces back to the 1980s are still around helping distressed agricultural producers; a growing number of young professionals in such

diverse fields as healthcare—including behavioral health professions, veterinary medicine, farm business and agricultural law, to name but a few—are stepping up to the plate to help farmers improve their behavioral well-being

- New websites and telephone hotlines aimed at curtailing suicide by farmers, such as Ask in Earnest (www.askinearnest.org) and the Avera Farm and Ranch Stress Hotline in South Dakota (1-800-691-4336) are springing up around the US to support distressed persons involved in agriculture
- The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) authorized as part of the 2018 Farm Bill is being implemented by USDA, albeit slowly, with the award of funds to establish four regional centers around the country yet this year, and to be followed by additional state and local programs to assist distressed farmers, ranchers, and agricultural workers in the next five years

There are many additional projects and efforts to aid farmers through the current tough times that I know too little about to include them here. However, I can list some countermeasures to the uncertainty affecting farmers that may help distressed agricultural producers and their families, like these:

- Managing one's behavior is one of the few factors over which people engaged in agriculture have control; it is imperative to implement such behaviors as making sure to obtain adequate sleep, taking breaks from stress, talking meaningfully with loved ones and supporters, recreating and exercising adequately, praying and reflecting, eating and drinking healthfully
- Form a team that brings in multiple perspectives, such as lender advice, input from wise and experienced producers, farm business management expertise, behavioral health providers who understand farming, Extension specialists, and any other forms of assistance the operation lacks
- Carefully assess federal programs to offset low or nonexistent crop yields and other government programs, both from the USDA and state programs, including Extension and the department of agriculture for one's state

How is your state and community assisting farmers?

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