The Changing Role of Rural Life in Wisconsin: Implications for Family Farms and the Church

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NOTES

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is the public policy agency of the State’s Roman Catholic Bishops, who lead 1.5 million Catholics in five dioceses.

This paper was prepared by the staff of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference after consultation with: Catholic farmers; the Churches Center for Land and People; the National Catholic Rural Life Conference; the rural life committee of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches; the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; and the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Agricultural Technology and Family Farm Institute.

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Executive Summary

Parishes throughout the five Catholic dioceses of Wisconsin are experiencing first hand the declining prominence of the family farm and the suburbanization of areas that were once verdant farm fields. Farmers, especially, have turned to the Church seeking encouragement and support as they struggle to continue farming in an economic system that no longer provides adequate reimbursement for the costs of production.

This paper provides a discussion tool to help Catholics and others to begin reflecting on the economic, moral and social issues raised by the changes in Wisconsin's rural landscape. It is hoped that this paper will help facilitate Catholic and ecumenical discussions in parishes across the state.

For decades, farming was the backbone of Wisconsin's economy. Hillsides were dotted with small family farms where parents, children and grandparents worked side-by-side. But the landscape is changing; the urban centers of the state are expanding into endless suburbs. Farmland has given way to strip malls and housing complexes. The center of rural life is no longer focused on 4-H youth groups and other agrarian-centered activities. Instead, families flock to school athletic events and suburban malls.

Today, Wisconsin farmers comprise only two percent of the state population and farm families are increasingly relying on off-farm jobs for income and other benefits like health insurance and pensions.

The number of farms in Wisconsin has steadily decreased from a peak of 199,877 in 1935. While the number of farms and farmland acres has fallen, the average farm has increased in size. In an effort to stay economically viable, farmers have felt forced to expand their operations on the idea that "bigger is better." Many of these technological changes have led farmers to take on dangerous debt and use chemicals and other processes that alter the natural integrity of meat, milk and other foodstuffs.

The backbone of farming in Wisconsin continues to be dairying. As the number one cheese producing state in the nation, Wisconsin annually produces about 30 percent of the country's cheese. The production and marketing of cheese involves major corporate players who are facing pressure to compete in national and international economic markets.

Although seemingly distant from the farmer in the field, these forces are changing the nature of farming.

Farm operators in Wisconsin work an average of 61 hours a week and 49 weeks a year. Farm women feel the pressure of not only working on the farm but also maintaining the household, raising the children and holding an off-farm job to bring in a much-needed second income or health insurance.
While farm families speak of their love of farming and the special relationship derived from living and working close to the land, the vast majority of farm children are no longer following in their parents footsteps. The shortage of new farmers is creating a hardship for older farmers who want to retire but have no one to sell their business to.

Agricultural economists say the state’s farm economy has stabilized since the mid 1980s downturn, which drove many farmers out of business. But many farmers disagree. They say the farm economy might be considered stable but it is not healthy. They say the numbers of farmers will continue to dwindle as long as farmers are inadequately compensated for their work.

A variety of church-funded and government programs are available to help farm families in trouble, but none of these efforts is sufficient to undo what many farmers say is the basic injustice under which they operate. The injustice, they say, is a system of milk marketing and pricing that fails to reimburse farmers for the actual costs of production.

Taken together, these changes are having an enormous impact on the character of rural life in Wisconsin. Exhausted by failed state and federal efforts to legislate change, farmers are looking to the Church and each other for ways to reinvigorate rural life and family farming.

As farmers raise these issues it is incumbent on the rest of the population -- which relies on the work of farmers for their daily bread -- to discuss the impact these changes have on the quality of life in Wisconsin.

We need to pause and ask about the economic and spiritual health of those who live in the state’s rural and once-rural areas. We need to reflect on our moral obligations as consumers and stewards of God’s creation as we assess the economic systems that fail to fairly compensate farmers for their work.
Introduction

As farm fields give way to suburban housing developments and strip malls across Wisconsin, more and more people are voicing concern about the future of the land. This continuing shift of population from urban centers to once rural areas has generated fear about the future of rural life in Wisconsin.

Parishes throughout Wisconsin's five Catholic dioceses -- Green Bay, LaCrosse, Madison, Milwaukee and Superior -- are experiencing first hand the declining prominence of the family farm and the economic development of areas that were once verdant farm fields. Farmers, especially, have turned to the Church seeking encouragement and support as they struggle to continue farming in an economic system that no longer provides adequate reimbursement for the costs of production.

In an effort to respond to these cries for help, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference provides this discussion tool, which offers an overview of the issues affecting farming in Wisconsin.

It is hoped that parishes throughout the state will convene discussion groups to review this document and talk about its implications. It is only through dialogue within parishes and communities that Catholics can come to a better understanding of the farmers' plight and determine what, if any, action is appropriate to stem the tide of change.

Historical Overview of Farming

At the heart of widespread alarm over the demise of the family farm is a desire to maintain a rural lifestyle that, in its ideal state, allows families to work side-by-side cultivating God's beautiful creation. This is not a new ideal. It has been an enduring part of American popular thought since before the Revolutionary War.

This persistent current of thought in American history holds that agriculture as an occupation is superior to work in the cities. With its links to the earth, farming is supposed to give rise to people who are more virtuous, more honorable, and more pious than those who labor elsewhere. Farming has long been thought to instill political virtue in citizens as well. Many believed work in the country insulated people from the corruptions of organized life in cities. Thomas Jefferson's idealized republic was based on widespread land ownership by independent, largely self-sufficient farmers.

In the early 20th century, as in other times, Americans often turned to the image of the farm as a comforting symbol of American wholesomeness. Then, as now, preserving the farm was thought to be a means of preserving American values of self-sufficiency and individualism. Farmers have been disappearing from the land steadily since the nation's birth. By the time Jefferson died in 1826, his vision of a nation of atomized, independent farms already
was yielding to urban growth and the rise of "internal improvements" such as toll roads and steamships.

Farming's relative share of national output has declined since the beginning. Agrarian hardship in the 1890s gave rise to the Populist movement, with its calls for railroad regulation and monetary reform. Many point to the years immediately before World War I as agriculture's most prosperous days. But the fat years of American agriculture have always been interspersed with the lean.

In 1920 the nation entered a deep and disillusioning agricultural depression. Farm prices fell by half from 1920 to 1921. As the '20s wore on, many farmers (particularly young ones) found that agriculture could not support the sort of consumer desires which arose during that pivotal decade: for automobiles, radios, electric lights, and other goods.

From 1920 to 1925 the U.S. farm population suffered a net loss of two million people. Agricultural economists at the time noted two factors that, throughout American history, have tended to place farmers at the cutting edge of economic hardship:

- Farmers, who produce mostly unchanging commodities (such as wheat) under conditions of high fixed costs and limited entry to production, have been at the mercy of markets because they have little ability to organize to control the terms of production;

- The farm population is constantly decreasing, either in real numbers or relative to the rest of the American population, which makes it even more difficult for farmers to organize.

In an effort to energize the farm economy, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal created crop price support programs to put money in farmers' hands and to insulate them from fluctuations in the market. Instead of being phased out when the farm economy took off, the programs continued.

Since the mid-1980s the federal government has been struggling with the realization that it can't fund its programs to supply farmers with the same level of help as in the past. However, government has generally continued subsidies because they keep U.S. food prices relatively low compared with the world.

As a result, in many cases, consumers pay only slightly more for food than it costs to produce. The meager profits get divided between the grocer, packager and farmer, who often receives such a small share that it barely covers the cost of producing the food. This situation has caused farmers and farm advocates to question the justice of an economic system that fails to compensate the person who -- with God's help -- actually grew the crops, milked the cows, and raised the beef, poultry and pork.
In recent years, federal legislators have been trying to phase-in changes to farm policy that would move farmers toward an unsubsidized, deregulated, market-oriented agricultural economy. The 1990 farm bill pulled back government price supports by reducing the number of acres the government would subsidize.

The 1995 farm bill continues this effort by eliminating decades-old federal programs that pay farmers to limit the planting of certain crops, like wheat and corn and that also subsidize farmers when market prices are low. These programs have been replaced by fixed payments that would gradually decline over seven years.

UW agricultural economists warn that historically, federal farm programs haven't guaranteed the health of the family farm. Farmers have gone out of business even with farm programs and this will continue. Economists say federal farm policies don't prevent the sale of farms, it slows them down. At its core, they argue, federal farm policy helps temper supply and demand, which keeps markets stable and avoids volatility in prices of farm products. The federal government's aim is not to keep America's idyllic farm life. Its aim is to control the economy.

The United States Catholic Conference's reaction to the farm bill was mixed. While the USCC said there was progress on its priorities of conservation, food programs and rural development, it said the bill's support of the "freedom to farm" concept would likely accelerate the decline of family farms and rural communities.

It appears that there is no impending effort in the state legislature or Congress to address the fundamental issue affecting farmers: the ability to obtain prices for the sale of their goods that reflect the real costs of production.

**Wisconsin Farms**

A farm, according to state agencies and the United States Census, is defined as a place that produces and sells at least $1,000 of agricultural products in a normal year. In 1994, one-third of Wisconsin farms had sales of less than $10,000. These small-scale operations underscore the diversity of farming in Wisconsin. While they are not the traditional operations we normally picture when discussing Wisconsin farming, they are a significant component of the state's agricultural economy.

The number of farms in Wisconsin has steadily decreased from a peak of 199,877 farms in 1935. Since then, the number of farms and the number of farmland acres has fallen while the average farm increased in size. By 1994, there were 78,000 farms in Wisconsin. Of that, 29,000 were in dairying. Their average size was 216.7 acres.

Despite the persistent decline in farm numbers, Wisconsin's agricultural economy grew through much of the 1970s. Farm product prices, income and milk price supports rose substantially. The
increase in farm net worth increased farmers' access to credit. Land values increased because land generated higher incomes and because of inflation. The situation changed in the 1980s with the worldwide recession and a decline in international demand for U.S. exports. This triggered a reduction in farm profits and farm land values.

After being encouraged by "experts" to take advantage of easy access to almost unlimited credit in the 1970s, farmers found in the 1980s that the health of their operations were being judged by cash flow and not assets and liabilities as before. These new accounting practices led to farm foreclosures. During this financial crisis, Wisconsin farm income dropped about 40 percent and land values dropped one-third. The decline in the number of farms continued, but at a lower rate than the national average.

Dairy Farms

One cannot talk about Wisconsin farming without considering dairy farms. After increasing steadily for decades, Wisconsin milk production peaked in 1988 at 25 billion pounds. In August 1993, California produced more milk than Wisconsin and the gap has been widening since. California outpaced Wisconsin because, while its farms have fewer cows than Wisconsin's, their per-cow milk output is actually higher. Some credit this higher production to better breeding and Bovine Growth Hormone. Others blame the gap on several consecutive "bad feed" years when weather damaged Wisconsin's feed crop quality.

While Wisconsin lost its status to California as the top milk producer, Wisconsin's dairy industry continues to provide the major source of cash receipts to state farmers. It is estimated that dairying represents 5 percent of Wisconsin's Gross State Product and accounts for 58,000 jobs or 2 percent of state employment. Wisconsin is the number one cheese producing state, making 30 percent of the country's cheese in 1994.

The vast majority of farms (over 80 percent) in Wisconsin are family owned, according to a survey by the UW's Farm Institute. While there are corporate farms in Wisconsin, the majority are family operations that have been organized as corporations for tax and other business advantages.

Some of Wisconsin's most successful farms are single corporations organized by a large, extended farm family. These single farms support several branches of one family and employ outside workers, as well. Many of these farms not only provide health insurance and paid vacation for family members but also provide these to non-family employees.

While Wisconsin has some of the toughest anti-corporate farm laws in the country, farmers and farm advocates fear the encroachment of anonymous, corporations from outside Wisconsin. Experience from other states has shown that it is difficult for family farms to
compete in the marketplace when large corporations set up profits-at-any-cost operations.

Technology

Technological innovations have changed the way farmers do their jobs. As a nation, we use less labor to produce more food than in former times. This has pushed less productive farmers out of business. Economists say not much can be done to change this, short of legislation that limits farm size or productivity.

Throughout history, technological change has been a key factor in making America's farms more productive than in other countries. Farmers are encouraged to adopt new agricultural innovations because, in the short run, they reduce the per-unit costs of production and increase farm incomes. Government supports these technological changes because they also help keep U.S. food prices low.

In the long run, however, technological changes can lead farmers to take on more debt to finance innovations, which increase the food supply and drive down the prices farmers receive for their products. Farmers say they are often pushed into adopting new techniques by state agricultural agencies and university experts who exert enormous pressure to "keep up with the times," even though the long-term effect is to drive down prices, which is not financially beneficial to farmers.

Many farmers say these innovations have underscored the reality that not all change is for the better. Some of these so-called improvements put farmers on a never-ending race for the newest, latest and so-called best equipment or chemicals that are increasingly more expensive and consume a larger part of the farm's cash-flow.

Because of the new technologies, farmers who want to stay competitive have to increase productivity. More and more, farmers are accomplishing this by specializing in one area. In times past, a farm family grew all its own feed for livestock that provided milk and meat. While it is still a common model, more farmers are moving toward specializing in one area, such as milk production or breeding. For example, a farmer specializing in milk production may devote all his energies to managing and culling and breeding his herd to maximize per-cow milk output. He'll rely on another farmer, who specializes in feed production, to provide the best possible feeds available through expert seed selection and crop management.

Sustainable Agriculture

In addition to specialization, farmers are staying competitive by using sustainable agriculture techniques. Sustainable agriculture seeks ways to "do more with less." Often, this means reverting to centuries-old farming practices that had been abandoned to
technology. For example, farmers learned they could lower their manure removal costs by returning to the practice of grazing cows, rather than having them locked in barn stantions or corals all day. Farmers can cut their fertilizer expenses and labor costs through crop rotation. Rather than planting the same crop on the same acreage every year and fertilizing to rebuild the soil, farmers plan a rotation of crops that will naturally rebuild the soil from year to year.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture officials say experience has shown that small family farms can prosper if they are willing to specialize and/or investigate sustainable agriculture strategies. The Department has resources to help farmers learn how to do this (see attachment 1).

Economists say the push toward specialization is also being driven by farmers’ unwillingness and inability to finance the purchase of modern equipment needed to run a farm. The equipment is a necessity since today’s farmer must comply with a myriad of federal and state health and safety regulations that were unrequired of earlier generations. While many of these regulations -- such as those relating to sanitation and cleanliness -- have helped ensure food safety and quality, other regulations have had the opposite effect. Both farmers and consumers have growing concerns about the increasing routine use of chemicals, pesticides and hormones in the development of many food products.

Farmers and farm advocates also argue that the push by academics, bureaucrats and agribusiness for specialization and increased production are precisely the problem in farming today. Farmers argue that the family farm traditionally has been a diversified operation that combines the production of several crops and livestock. For decades of America’s history, this diversification provided farmers with a stable income and a moderate degree of self-sufficiency and security. Farmers say that they have lost this because they have followed for too long much of the advice of the so-called agricultural experts.

Wisconsin Farmers, Spouses and Children

Farmers comprise two percent of the state population. The median total farm household income is $43,483, which includes 61 percent from farm earnings and 39 percent from off-farm sources. Off-farm income is very important to Wisconsin farm families.

Almost half (47 percent) of farm families obtain more of their household income from off-farm earnings than from farm earnings. For most small and medium-sized farms, off-farm income is the predominant source of total household income. (Small and medium-sized farms are those with gross annual farm sales of $1,000 to $49,999). However, dairy farm households are more likely to generate the majority of their income from farm activities.
About 13.3 percent of Wisconsin farm households have below poverty incomes ($14,228 for a family of four in 1992). This is comparable to national estimates for the entire population, but less than rural poverty figures in many southern and Appalachian states, according to the UW's 1993 Family Farm Institute survey.

The average age of farm operators is 52 years and the average age of spouses is 48. About half of farm operators and spouses graduated from high school, 25 percent had additional schooling and 22 percent quit school before receiving a high school diploma.

Farm operators worked an average of 61 hours a week and 49 weeks a year in 1992. Dairy farmers worked more than twice as many hours per year on the farm as other farmers -- 75 hours a week and 51 weeks a year.

Women and Farming

Farm spouses work similarly long hours, but their work is divided between on-farm labor, housework, and off-farm jobs that provide the family with steady income and health insurance. Farm spouses worked on the farm an average of 25 hours per week, 46 weeks a year. However, this on-farm workload does not include hours spent running and maintaining the household and caring for children. Nearly 50 percent of farm spouses earn income off the farm, working an average of 33 hours a week, 43 weeks a year.

Farm women feel torn between their on-farm business work, housework, off-farm employment and civic involvement, according to results of UW Family Farm Institute focus groups held across the state in 1992-1993. Women said off-farm work is disruptive to family life because it becomes more difficult to communicate with a spouse about farm issues, maintain the marriage, and make children do chores. In some farm families, women run the farm and men work off-farm because they can earn more money per hour.

Farm women voiced concern about how they are paid for their on-farm work. Since women are automatically considered housewives and not farmers, they are not compensated for their work by the tax structure or Social Security at the same rate as their husbands. Women injured on the farm are unable to collect Social Security disability although they file joint tax returns. When retirement time comes, farm women do not receive equal Social Security as their husbands.

The focus groups also said farm families have become more individualized. Farm women feel more isolated because many other farm women work off the farm. The family size is smaller and there are fewer children to help. However, because farm work is more automated, it is more difficult to put children to work because of safety issues. As a result, the lifestyle of farm children is now more like that of urban children while the farm and non-farm parents' life-styles are different. This creates stress for farm parents who want to participate in their children's after-school
activities but can't attend because the events are held during evening chore time.

The declining number of farm families has changed the landscape of rural life. The UW Family Farm Institute's focus groups revealed that farmers don't feel understood or accepted by their suburban neighbors. Farmers noted that the focus of community life is little league and high school sports --- not churches and 4-H groups or farm organizations as in the past. This was reiterated by the Milwaukee Archdiocese's Rural Life Director, Fr. Bernie Sippel.

Who Farms, Who Leaves and What Does it Mean?

UW agricultural economists say Wisconsin's farm financial situation is currently stable. Incomes are not as high as some producers would like but are not falling precipitously. The value of land, which comprises 70 to 80 percent of farmers' net worth, is stable or rising. Land values are now back up to the levels before the 1980s farm crisis.

Farmers say the farm economy might be considered stable but it is not healthy from their perspective. They say land values may be back up but land values don't pay their bills. Farmers say their numbers will continue to dwindle until farmers are more fairly compensated for their work and have the cash-flow to stay in business.

While there are many reasons why farmers leave the profession, the UW Farm Family Institute conducted a survey to assess some of the main ones. According to the Institute's 1993 survey, those who said they "voluntarily" left farming cited their age and health as reasons for leaving. Those who said they left farming "involuntarily" cited low income, future financial outlook, family stress, and debt as reasons for leaving.

However, the survey noted that the involuntary exiters did not experience a complete upheaval of family life since most continued to live in the same community in which they had farmed, and three-fourths lived in the same house.

While the over-all rate of exit from farming has not changed dramatically from the past, the rate of entrance has slowed. While the USDA has reported that the decline in farms is not a threat to the nation's food supply, the UW Family Farm Institute is concerned the decline in farm numbers will have an impact on the viability of rural communities in the future. This is of particular concern in many Wisconsin communities where agriculture has been the backbone of the economy.

Philosophically, there are also concerns that as the numbers of farms decrease, the means of production will be left in the hands of ever fewer people. In the short-run, economists say it would drive down food prices because of competition. But, in the long-run, prices would be corrected upward to reflect fewer suppliers.
However, as farmers often point out, there is no assurance that farmers will ever see these increase in profits. In fact, experience leads them to believe that these increases will be gobbled up by grocers and packagers.

The UW's Farm Institute said the main reasons young people don't enter farming are because: they lack equity to take on loans needed to buy necessary equipment and livestock; off-farm employment is more readily available and provides better salary and benefits; and farming requires a heavier workload and more stress than other employment opportunities. Given these realities, farm families often discourage their own from carrying on the family business.

A shortage of new farmers poses a potential danger to the farm economy because it creates a lack of buyers to purchase the farms of those needing or wanting to retire. The majority of households with older farmers wishing to retire lack a family member ready and able to take over. This is in part due to smaller families and the fact that many people increasingly view farming as an undesirable occupation.

The UW's Family Farm Institute found that beginning farmers are increasingly people raised in urban areas, or women, or people aged 35 or older who come from non-family farm backgrounds (such as urban professionals).

When there are few buyers, retiring farmers have a tendency to wait until the last minute to sell. When the whole farm is sold at once, a farmer's tax burden increases, thus leaving less money for retirement. Selling a farm in parcels over time is a benefit to new farmers, too, since it gives them time to build capital and borrow money over time.

Experience from the 1980s farm crisis has shown that new farmers are ill-served by taking on huge debts to build capital quickly. In an effort to smooth transitions on and off the farm, the Department of Agriculture set up an entry/exit program in January 1996. (see attachment 1).

**State Legislative Responses to the Decline in Farms**

The decline of farming in the state is also evident in the makeup of the state legislature and the number of farm-related bills under consideration. In times past, a large number of state legislators were farmers. Today, only six of the state's 132 legislators are farmers and one is a seed and feed store owner. Three more legislators are retired from farming. Nine others have reputations for being strong agriculture and family farm advocates.

In an effort to support family farms, the Legislature created the Agricultural Technology and Family Farm Institute in 1990. The Institute is the lead unit of the University of Wisconsin for assessing the status of family farming. The Institute is charged with developing empirical research and data analysis that would
help increase understanding of how farms are changing and the potential policy alternatives available for enhancing the future of the family farm.

Based on several listening sessions with farmers across the state in 1992-1993, the Institute has listed the following issues as the ones farmers themselves identified as top priorities:

1. Farming must be more economically viable and socially attractive.
2. Capital gains taxes are burdensome for buyers and sellers.
3. Capital costs of entering farming are prohibitive for young people.
4. The existing marketing structure is inequitable.
5. Farmers want new ways to market their products.
6. Property taxes, especially school taxes, burden farmers unfairly.
7. Health insurance costs create a large financial burden for farm families.
8. Women face conflicts between their on- and off-farm roles.
9. Environmental policy that controls agriculture needs to be reviewed.
10. Communication and interaction between farmers and nonfarmers needs to be improved.

While many of these issues cannot be resolved merely by passing laws, the state Legislature has addressed some of them. An outline of legislative responses to these individual issues is covered in attachment 3.

United States Catholic Conference Response to Farm Policy

The United State’s Catholic Conference’s Committee on Social Development and World Peace advocated efforts to support family farms in its 1979 statement, The Family Farm. The USCC said its "defense of the family farm is in part a defense of the private and family values it can foster."

While recognizing the various economic arguments about the necessity of saving the family farm, the USCC wrote:

"Even if one could demonstrate that some absolute economic gain could be realized from further concentration in the agricultural sector, that gain would not be worth the price paid in social terms. It would cost this country an important and universally-praised feature of its culture, and further limit the number of our people engaged in the production of basic necessities. It would increase the risk that control over our food production system would be forfeited to powerful corporate interests. It would all but destroy a system of widespread farm ownership by resident operators that is conducive to responsible stewardship. To suggest that such a prospect serves the common good is a mockery."
The USCC's concerns were echoed by the Bishops of 12 Heartland states, including Wisconsin, in their 1980 pastoral letter, Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland.

The Heartland Bishops pointed out that the family farm has helped form the heartland's heritage. Farm life has helped preserve and promote such values as faith, hope, perseverance, generosity, trustworthiness, honesty and concern for the neighbor. It has inspired care of the land as a limited natural resource (#24).

When farmers are forced off the land, they risk being replaced by nonfarmers who do not depend on the land for their livelihood and may not adequately care for it (#28).

These trends are alarming for the Church because they veer from the Christian tradition's biblically-based concept of stewardship, which describes what people's relationships should be with the land and with each other (#49). "Those who are God's stewards on the land are also co-creators with God in guiding the land's productive power and in conserving the land's natural gifts. As co-creators, God's stewards help the land fulfill the purpose for which God created it: to help satisfy the physical, social and spiritual needs of God's creatures." (#55).

Once family farms are taken over by corporations, the country's economic system will be driven by their interests, which are often focused on competitiveness, profit maximization, consumerism and an unquestioning acceptance of economic, political, and legal structures that oppress people (#33, 34).

In their 1986 pastoral, Economic Justice for All, the U.S. Bishops said the Church was concerned about the demise of the family farm because it leads to a decline in rural communities and concentrates land ownership in fewer hands (#220, 234).

The Bishops said widespread land ownership is important because it facilitates democratic decision making and prevents the dangers stemming from the concentration of power in the hands of a few. Similarly, the vitality of rural communities is important to American life, they wrote, because it helps maintain the rich plurality of social institutions that enhance personal freedom and increase the opportunity for participation in community life.

The Pastoral recommended three guidelines for public policy and private efforts aimed at shaping American agriculture: 1) moderate sized farms operated by families on a full-time basis should be preserved and their economic viability protected; 2) the opportunity to engage in farming should be protected as a valuable form of work; 3) effective stewardship of our natural resources should be a central consideration in any measures regarding U.S. agriculture (#s 233-238).

In Wisconsin, two of the three guidelines are being supported in various public and private efforts. The first guideline appears to be supported by the Department of Agriculture's Entry/Exit
Coalition (see attachment 1), the UW’s Family Farm Institute, and the Milwaukee Archdiocese’s and Green Bay Diocese’s farm disaster funds (see p. 12). The second guideline appears to be supported by the legislature’s recent passage of the Right To Farm Bill (see attachment 3).

More recently, the USCC’s Farm and Agriculture Subcommittee has been advising the Domestic Policy Committee on farm and rural life issues. The Subcommittee met in January 1996 and has recommended that the USCC integrate farm and rural life policies into other domestic policy issues. For example, preservation of the family farm and the widespread ownership of productive land could be incorporated into USCC’s positions on broader economic policy issues. Concerns about farm family poverty could be incorporated into positions on hunger and welfare. Concern about rural development and agricultural contamination could be folded into USCC’s advocacy on the environment.

USCC staff is looking for an issue of significance to rural Catholics that the Church could address and which is winnable, given the makeup and priorities of Congress.

Other State Catholic Conferences Responses to Rural Life

In response to the federal reauthorization of the Farm Bill, the Kansas Catholic Conference issued a statement in November 1995 calling on Congress to "develop a farm policy that is fair and resourceful, promoting family farms, widespread ownership of the land, and aiding rural communities."

The statement said the decline of farming and rural communities could be reversed if Congress targeted farm programs away from large corporations and toward small and medium sized farms and if new farmers were given more opportunities to gain capital and borrow money.

Wisconsin Dioceses’ Responses to Rural Life Issues

The state’s five dioceses have responded to rural life issues in varying ways, depending on the available resources in the diocesan office charged with overseeing rural life. Not all of the efforts have been successful; some were tried and cancelled. Others were more effective and are growing. Some of the most successful responses have been ecumenical efforts.

The Milwaukee Archdiocese: In an effort to determine how parishes are ministering to rural families in poverty, Fr. Bernard Sippel, Director of Rural Life, conducted a survey of the Archdiocese’s 99 small town/rural parishes. Thirty pastors responded.

Several pastors commented that many rural families are only one paycheck away from disaster. Housing stock is very poor. Many rural
families live in badly insulated old farmhouses that drain family finances with high winter heating bills.

The pastors said St. Vincent DePaul’s thrift stores, food drives and fund drives are the backbone of services to the poor. In 1995, those 30 parishes together gave a total of 17 tons of food and $12,000 to local food pantries. Monthly, the parishes collectively provide 94 workers who give 240 hours of free services.

Yet, despite the obvious need, Fr. Sippel said people won’t come forward with problems. Parishes learn about Catholic families in need from County Social Service Departments rather from fellow parishioners. This has frustrated both Catholic and Protestant ministers who say they no longer know how to minister to rural families.

However, the Archdiocese continues to make efforts to reach out. In 1985, the Rural Life Office joined with the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee to form the Wisconsin Farmers Foundation. They began with a $250,000 grant from former Milwaukee Bucks coach Don Nelson, who had traveled throughout the state to raise money for farmers.

The Foundation’s board includes the Archdiocese’s Social Action Office Director Warren Braun (president), and Fr. Sippel (treasurer). Other board members include a Black farmer and representatives from the United Church of Christ, and Baptist and Lutheran churches.

The Foundation sponsors Project Isidore, which has a "grant program" and a "revolving loan program" to assist farmers. Typically, farmers learn about the project from the Department of Agriculture’s farm crisis hotline (see attachment 1).

In 1995, the "grant program" was funded with $41,000 contributed by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the National United Church of Christ and a Catholic/Protestant Thanksgiving Day collection. Grants are given out in $500 increments to farmers seeking help for short-term problems, such as groceries, animal feed or pharmacy bills.

The "revolving loan program" is funded by a $20,000 grant from the Archdiocese’s Campaign for Human Development. Farmers or small town residents can borrow up to $3,000 at a 2 percent interest rate for three years to fund a new venture that will supplement their income. For example, a farmer noticed that his rural township had an ongoing need for heavy grass clippings to use as cover to protect newly seeded ditches and other public areas. The farmer had a chopper but needed a baler to collect the clippings for sale to the township. He borrowed money to buy a baler and repaid the loan within the three year limit.

The "revolving loan program" currently has seven outstanding loans and hopes to expand the idea beyond Southeastern Wisconsin. The Foundation hopes to apply to the Madison Diocese’s Campaign for
Human Development to start a loan fund in the south central/western part of the state.

State banking laws require the Foundation to collaborate with a bank to administer the funds. Currently, banks in Elkhorn and St. Cloud are facilitating the loans. A bank in Mount Horeb has expressed some interest in facilitating the revolving loan fund for the Madison area and has even offered to supplement the fund with additional money. Banks are interested in such projects because it helps them comply with federal community reinvestment requirements.

Other efforts supported by the Archdiocese's Rural Life Office have not been as successful. There are two organizations that folded in recent years because they lacked resources. One group was Fond du Lac County Churches United and Strong (FOCUS), which was formed in the early 1990s to work on surface mining issues and gravel pits. The other is the Sheboygan County Interfaith Organization (SCIO), which was formed to protest Kraft's alleged price-fixing of cheese through the Wisconsin Cheese Exchange. It is believed that SCIO's work created pressure that led Kraft to create the Kraft Dairy Trust, which gives grants to farmers across the country. Project Isidore received a $15,000 grant in 1993 and $15,000 in 1994.

Another venture, Farm City Link, was started in the late 1980s by the Foundation to connect rural and urban people and was discontinued after a couple of years because of a lack of funds. However, in recent months, the program was revived by a grassroots group of farmers and the Hunger Task Force. They hope to bring and sell fresh fruits and vegetables in Milwaukee inner city neighborhoods without grocery stores.

Green Bay Diocese: The Social Concerns Office sponsors the Rural Life Disaster Program, which provides grants of up to $500 to help farm and rural families with short-term needs.

The program has helped 188 farm families since it started in 1993. Money has been used to keep food on the table, keep the electricity from being shut off or to buy cattle feed or pay medical expenses. The program is facilitated by Deacon Orvell De Bruin. Each family requesting help receives an on-site visit and personal contact evaluation from the Church. The grants are not meant to save a family farm. The personal visits are often an opportunity to encourage farm families to reconsider whether they are saving the farm at the expense of their families or marriages.

Catholic Farm Families Speak Out

Since there are no government statistics on the number of Catholic farmers, WCC staff used diocesan and state statistics to estimate that there are about 29,517 Catholic farmers in Wisconsin (see attachment 2 for a breakdown by diocese).

WCC staff contacted several Catholic farmers, who were eager to discuss their concerns about the changes in rural and farm life.
While each of the families contacted thought the Church could be more vocal in its support of farm families, they agreed that the demise of family farms is being hastened by low prices. Farmers are not being paid a fair price for their products and, in many cases, are selling products at a loss because they are paid less than the actual costs of production. They also agree that farmers could change this if they were more willing to organize and fight for fair prices.

Francis Kliebenstein, a Darlington-area farmer who is retired after nearly 60 years in farming, said "I blame the farmer. He will not organize. He's too damn independent."

However, his wife Dorothy said the Church could be instrumental in encouraging farmers to "work together, to become united, to organize to push for an increase in prices for their products."

Despite the economic hardship and the long work weeks inevitable in farming, the farmers said their work was worth preserving because it is one of the few natural work environments left in the modern world. In discussing the reason for preserving their "way of life," the farmer's comments evoked St. Thomas Aquinas' theory of virtue -- that living on the farm habituates children and adults to man's higher virtues.

"The land belongs to the Lord and its the best place to raise a family," said Dorothy Kliebenstein. "The children learn to work, they grow up with chores and develop a good work ethic."

Francis echoed this, saying "there's no place to be as close to family and nature. The kids are working with you. You spend more time with them."

This was echoed by another Catholic farmer, John Kinsman, 70, who lives on the border of the Madison and LaCrosse Dioceses and raised ten children on his Sauk County farm, which he continues to operate.

"In your hands you have the basic concepts of life. You have the plants and animals in your life. You feel like a partner with God. Farming is a very spiritual and uplifting thing. It's working so close to God and so close to nature."

The desire to preserve the family farm as a lifestyle is "about relationships and taking care of the world for those who come after us. People want to take care of the land for future generations," Kinsman said.

"If this connection with the land, and where life comes from, is lost, we've lost half of ourselves. We've lost half of our personality, we feel we're no longer connected to the earth, we've lost part of our spirituality. This leads to a sense of powerlessness," he said.
"Alienation in rural areas leads people to join these fringe groups that espouse conspiracy theories and they latch on to it because they are desperate. This kind of alienation is fueling these odd militia groups with religious names. That was the basis for the Oklahoma City disaster."

Kinsman helped found the national chapter of Family Farm Defenders. He has been a guest speaker at farm preservation forums in Germany and Spain. One of his trips was sponsored by the Lutheran church.

"The Europeans are very conscious of what happens when the connection with the land is lost because they’ve all been through it. Over the last 300 years they have suffered from the loss of family farms. Their economies have suffered from that loss. So they are very conscious of not letting it get worse and trying to hang on to what little they have."

The farmers warned that without family farms, the future of the rural Catholic parishes is in doubt.

Francis Kliebenstein observed that his parish "used to have the better part of 80 families and now we’ve got only about 30 families. Our schools, our community is disappearing."

Platteville farmer Dave Runde, 73, said churches will benefit from farmers financial health because farmers are the backbone of the rural church. Rural churches are in financial straits because farmers have no money to contribute, he said.

When asked what the Church could do to help, the farmers identified the following efforts:

-- The Church could publicly identify and name the decline of family farms as a societal problem.

-- The Church could be a better listener of farmers’ needs, by holding diocesan listening sessions.

-- The Church could reinforce the stewardship of the land by encouraging rural planning that keeps land accessible to the public.

-- The Church could form alliances between rural and suburban people.

-- The Church could celebrate the anniversary of economic and farm pastorals, which recognize farmers’ right to receive a fair price for their products.

Summary and Reflections: Looking Beyond Economics

As we have seen from the preceding pages, the condition of Wisconsin farming is a complex situation that involves economic, political, social and moral issues.
As various sources contacted for this paper observed, the demise of the family farm is a complex issue that cannot be solved by simply passing a law or making more money available to farmers -- as many of the public and private efforts generally have done. The change in family farming is being driven by economic forces and technological innovations that are beyond the control of just one entity, such as the government or the church.

But should economics have the last word? It is important to acknowledge the historical and economic forces that have shaped the environment of farming in Wisconsin. But, such recognition cannot be mistaken for tacit approval or a willingness to bow to structures that are, essentially, unjust for farmers and farm families and that threaten the future of the family farm. The Church must hear and engage both sides of the debate.

On one side of the issue are farmers and farm advocates who fear that the decline of the family farm signals the loss of something irreplaceable in American society. The farm is one of the last places, they say, where families can work side by side in a special relationship with one another. Through their work as the stewards of land and livestock, they live in special relationship with God. They are concerned about the concentration of farm ownership in the hands of a few corporations. They say this concentration threatens ground water and air quality and could possibly lead to price fixing of the American food supply.

For these reasons, they argue, more must be done to prevent the closure and sale of family farms. They say there is plenty that can be done, if only the Church and other societal institutions would show some leadership in saving the farm. Simple efforts that support rural communities would be a good first step.

For example, the UW Family Farm Institute’s focus groups identified the need to improve understanding and dialogue between farm and non-farm neighbors. Farmers said they feel misunderstood by their suburban neighbors and farm children are often ostracized because they are different. Farmers said churches could help coordinate suburban parishioners’ visits to farms or provide information in the bulletin about farm life to help suburbanites understand the rural landscape they’ve moved into. *(A sample of other such efforts is outlined in attachment 4 of this paper.)*

On the other side of the issue are those who are unsure whether much can be done to save the family farm when one considers the historical decline of farming and the workings of America’s economic system.

Is it just, they question, to seek special status for family farms and not family-run pharmacies or hardware stores? Like farming, these businesses were once fixtures in every small town in America. Husband and wife worked side by side in these enterprises, while their children stocked shelves, swept floors and made deliveries. These family-run businesses are slowly disappearing in towns across America, as discount stores like Wal Mart and Ace Hardware take
over, offering consumers more inventory at better prices. Like family farms, these businesses were passed on from generation to generation and instilled the same values fostered on the family farm.

While the loss of such fixtures in the rural community were always noted, the Church rarely took an active role in trying to preserve these other venerable professions. Catholics may wish to consider what it is about family farming that is different than these other institutions. What is it about rural life that we might want to preserve?

Those who are uncertain about the adviseability of government or church efforts to "save the farm," question the basis for such a deep distrust of corporate farming. They say corporations in and of themselves are no more honorable or wicked than family farmers. They say each farmer and each corporation should be judged on its own merits.

Where is the evidence, they ask, for claiming that corporations will be less responsible stewards of natural resources than individual farm families? They say the 1930s Oklahoma dustbowl resulted from bad farming and soil practices used by individual family-run farms -- not corporations. They argue that there is no proof or record that corporations, as a group, will be any more or less responsible than individual farmers when taken as a group.

In addition, they say, the existence and proliferation of Amish farms across the country are proof that family farms can exist. But, they also offer a sober reminder that if one wants to live off the land in the modern world, it means many of the modern conveniences of life have to be sacrificed. They say farmers can't have it both ways -- they can't live like their ancestors did even 30 years ago and expect to also have the standard of living of today's off-farm society. They argue that if farmers want to attain a modern standard of living, they have to accept the necessity of participating in a competitive economy that rewards innovation and cost containment.

Finally, they say, if we fear losing the family farm because it will mean the end of a place where young people are raised with solid values to become upright citizens, then we ought to work to preserve other institutions in our society that foster such values.

Despite these two differing views, however, there seems to be general agreement that society is losing something when the number of farms decline. But the concern about the decline is not focused on the availability of food since technological innovations have made it possible for fewer people to produce more food than in the past. Concern over the decline in family farms is more focused on our American affection for farming as a way of life.

Neither Fr. Sipple of the Milwaukee Archdiocese nor Deacon De Bruin from the Green Bay Diocese appear to favor saving the farm for the sake of the farm itself. Both expressed concern that many families
were suffering economically and emotionally because they were hanging on to the family business despite the harm it was causing to their marriage and/or children.

Deacon De Bruin said farming is no longer a way of life, but a business and not all families have the ability to manage the farm as a business. De Bruin believes the Church has a special role to play in helping distressed farm families make the transition to a new lifestyle.

This thought was echoed by Department of Agriculture officials. They said the Church could be a useful partner in the Department’s new Farm entry/exit program. They welcome contact from Diocesan officials regarding possible partnerships (see attachment 1). For example, they suggested parishes could provide something as simple as their basement or meeting hall for a day-long farm workshop. Department experts would be available to counsel farmers on the economic strategies needed to enter or exit farming and facilitate long-term planning to help them accomplish their goal.

But some argue that following up on these suggestions reflects too much of a willingness to accept the status quo and the decline of family farms. They wonder if the Church does not question and challenge the existing economic system that prefers larger farms and the use of chemicals to small farms and healthier food, who will?

If the Church does not question why food is not fairly priced or valued for its real cost of production, who will? They argue that the Church’s social justice mission requires a more challenging response than merely accepting the existing social order.

As Brother David Andrews of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference explains it, "we need to save the family farm to preserve a life close to the earth, vital to the Christian identity and in solidarity with a way of life of millions of rural people around the world. We need to save the family farm because it is a repository of cultural and spiritual values."

"The people of the land have different habits of the heart than those imbued with a marketplace mentality."

"The family farm system provides a way of life which does not subordinate religion to economic desires. It provides context for habits of the heart which support care for creation, love of the land, love of family, love of God and country."

"The loss of the family farm will result in a way of life, a way of loving God and neighbor, a way of forming community with dire consequences for America, the Church and the world... We need to save the family farm to counter ecological, economic and cultural imperialism."
"We need to support the family farm because it is the best witness we have of living close to God, close to neighbor and close to the earth."

As the U.S. Bishops pointed out in Economic Justice for All, "our food production system is clearly in need of evaluation and reform." (#217) The food system is an integral part of the national and global economy and thus necessitates widespread concern and attention. "The food necessary for life, the land and water resources needed to produce that food, and the way of life of the people who make the land productive are at risk. Catholic social and ethical traditions attribute moral significance to each of these." (#250)

Underneath the shockingly rapid decline of the family farm lie fundamental moral concerns regarding the individual and family, the meaning and dignity of work, and the stewardship of the land, plants and animals with which God has blessed us.

Although some would argue that farming is simply business and that farmers ought to become better business managers or leave the farm, a Christian response must be willing to look at the profounder realities involved in the business of cultivating God's creation.

Certainly, sound business practices are essential to good farming, as they are essential to any field of human endeavor. But in farming, and in any other area of work, the business practices should be at the service of a profounder reality. If farming is viewed simply as a business, the good of farm work comes only from the financial reward it obtains. In such a view, the notion that "bigger is better" is bound to dominate.

The notion of the farmer's stewardship of the land, plants and animals should be the primary key to the understanding of farming and its goodness or value. The good of the farmer's work should be measured by his fidelity to conscience, to the responsibility for the land and creatures confided to his care, and not by financial success.

In light of the responsibility of stewardship which the farmer has, farm technology is judged according to its appropriateness. Some of the recent technology has not signalled progress and has worked against the farmer. Likewise, other technology which attempts to maximize the yield of the farm has proved to be poor stewardship because it fails to respect the natural order. Such technology has produced massive food that is questionably healthy for the consumer.

At the root of the decline of family farms lies the key problem of just remuneration for work done. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical Laborem Exercens, reminds us that "the justice of a socio-economic system and, in each case, its functioning, deserve in the final analysis to be evaluated by the way in which man's work is properly remunerated in the system.... a just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socio-economic
system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly. It is not the only means of checking, but it is a particularly important one and in a sense the key means." (#19.1)

Conclusion

What is needed, then, is a fundamental change of federal farm policy in which the good produced by the work of the farmer is reflected in what the consumer pays for dairy products, produce and other foodstuffs. The policy change can happen, if the consumer is made aware of and led to change the serious problems which the farmer faces because of the inadequate prices paid by for their products.

As members of a democratic society and as believers in the Resurrection, we know that it is both possible and necessary to lend our voices and actions to efforts to rectify unjust situations. We do have control over the economy, if we choose to exercise it. Farmers and consumers are not merely actors in a play written without their consent. Economic forces and technological innovations are under the control of individuals. Both individuals and the Church have the freedom to speak out. We must forcefully and persuasively direct our government to reevaluate so many of its economic and farm policies that have perpetuated these injustices.
Discussion Questions

1. What values are at stake in the discussion of preserving the family farm and rural communities? What values are in tension in this debate?

2. How is family farming different than other rural occupations like family pharmacies, hardware stores, grocery stores, etc?

3. Does the family farm deserve greater help and assistance from the Church than these other occupations? Why or Why not?

4. How will America’s economy, landscape and character be affected if family farms disappear and are replaced by corporate operations?

5. What aspects of rural life should we try to preserve? Why?

6. Are corporations reliable caretakers of the nation’s agricultural system? Why or Why not?

7. As an individual consumer, do you think your choices of where to shop and what to buy help sustain rural communities and family farms or not? How do you feel about the choices you make?
STATEWIDE RESOURCES FOR FARM FAMILIES

1. Agricultural Technology and Family Farm Institute
1535 Observatory Drive
1450 Linden Drive, Room 146
University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI 53706
(608) 265-2908; 262-8018

Goal: To assess the social, economic, and environmental status of family farming and identify ways to enhance the future of family farming in Wisconsin.

Director and Professor of Rural Sociology
Frederick H. Buttel
(608) 265-3490; 265-3646

Outreach Program Manager
Michele Gale-Sinex
(608) 262-5200

2. Wisconsin Farm Entry-Exit Coalition
Contact: Steve Stevenson
(608) 262-5202

Goal: To retain and build on Wisconsin’s tradition of a family-based farming system and economically stable rural communities.

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Programs:

3. Farmer’s Assistance Program
P.O. Box 8911
Madison, WI 53708-8911
800-942-2474; (608) 224-5051

Provides: Farm credit advisors, legal information, computerized financial services, employment and training services, mediation.

4. Farmer’s Assistance Hotline
Contact: Ms. Jeannie Meyer
800-942-2474

Provides: Advice and referral on farm-related issues including financial, educational and legal concerns, employment and family problems and health issues.

5. Farm Mediation and Arbitration Program
P.O. Box 8911
Madison, WI 53708-8911
800-942-2474; (608) 224-5052

Provides: Dispute resolution services to farmers with problems involving: creditor/debtor issues, contracts with food processors, fertilizer seed or feed dealers, conflicts within farm families, landlord and tenant issues and nonfarm neighbors.
6. Farm Link
P.O. Box 8911
Madison, WI 53708-8911
800-942-2474; (608) 224-5051
Goal: Assist beginning farmers looking for a chance to start
their own farm; farmers considering retirement; farmers
considering expansion by merging with other farmers; or farmers
considering relocation due to urban pressure or environmental
concerns. Transfer teams are available to assist farmers in
planning and preparing for these changes.

Grassroots Organizations and Resource Persons:

7. Wisconsin Women’s Sustainable Farming Network
Diane Kaufmann
Sundance Hill Farms
Chippewa Falls, WI 54729
(715) 723-2262

8. Prairie Fire Rural Action
Sponsors an annual Farm Women’s Conference
Contact: Ms. Barbara Grabner
(515) 244-5671

9. Churches’ Center for Land People
Sister Miriam Brown, Director
Dominican Mother House, General Delivery
Sinsinawa, WI 53824-9999
(608) 748-4411; ext. 805
Goal: This ecumenical organization brings together churches,
groups, and individuals to strengthen rural life and ministry in
Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois. Serves as a voice for rural
perspectives and concerns in local churches and society. Contact
to receive newsletter Clippings, learn about programs, join one
of the work/study groups in earth stewardship, renewal, ethics,
or rural ministry education. A Rural Life Gathering is held
every November.

10. Mr. Paul Dretmann
    c/o St. Aloysius Parish
    115 Madison St.
    Sauk City, WI 53583-1099
    (608) 643-4062

11. Mr. Richard Adamski and
    Val Dantoine
    Dairy and Beef Farmers
    Seymour, WI 54165
    (414) 823-6704
## WISCONSIN DIOCESAN FARM DATA, CATHOLIC TOTALS

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## DIOCESE

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### Assumption #1.
A herd is equal to a farm, therefore, number "herds" per diocese equals number of farms.

### Assumption #2.
If % Catholic from total pop equals "X", then "X" equals % total farmers who are Catholic.

### NB:
A farm is defined as "A place which sells $1,000 or more in agricultural products."

### Sources:
- Pastoral Handbook, 1996
- Wisconsin 1995 "Dairy Facts"
State Responses to Farm Issues: An Overview of Legislation

**Milk Marketing:** In response to concerns over inequitable marketing structures, Wisconsin has joined other Midwestern states in calling for reform of federal milk marketing orders, including providing $50,000 to support Minnesota’s ongoing lawsuit against the United States Department of Agriculture over the milk marketing system. State lawmakers have also attended and testified on behalf of Wisconsin farmers during Congressional hearings on the 1995 farm bill.

**Cheese Pricing:** Wisconsin is America’s number one cheese maker, producing one-third of the nation’s cheese. The fastest growing use for milk in Wisconsin is for cheese production, not for drinking. As a result, cheese prices directly affect the price farmers receive for their milk.

On May 14, 1996, Gov. Tommy Thompson announced the appointment of the Task Force on Cheese Pricing. The task force is charged with facilitating a discussion among the stakeholders of the cheese pricing system and making recommendations to improve the current system for the benefit of the dairy industry and consumers.

The task force will complete its work and issue a report to the governor by January 1, 1997. The 17-member task force is chaired by Fred Kasten, President and CEO of Robert W. Baird & Co. of Milwaukee. Other members include three dairy farmers and representatives from dairy cooperatives, cheese companies, the University of Wisconsin and the Department of Agriculture. Some farmers have questioned the task force’s ability to issue recommendations favorable to farmers given the preponderance of representatives from business and industry.

**Trade:** State lawmakers have sought to increase markets for Wisconsin farm products by spearheading agricultural trade missions to Europe, Asia and South America and through assisting Wisconsin companies with export efforts. In 1994, over $172 million in dairy products were exported from Wisconsin -- nearly one-fourth of all U.S. dairy exports. In addition, Wisconsin exported over $56 million in dairy genetics.

**Health Insurance:** In response to the health insurance problem, the Legislature has changed tax policy so that as of 1995 Wisconsin allows 100 percent of health insurance costs for self-employed people, such as farmers, to be deducted from gross income when calculating state income tax liability.

--OVER--
**Tax Relief:** In response to the tax burden, the 1995-1997 state budget began phasing-in a plan to assess agricultural land at its productive value as farmland rather than at its potential value as developed residential or commercial real estate. The change in assessment will be phased-in over ten-years and is expected to reduce agricultural land values for property-tax purposes by one-third.

The state also provides over $40 million annually in property tax credits to farmers through the Farmland Preservation Program credit and the farmland tax relief credit.

**Right To Farm Legislation:** The main farming bill passed by the 1996 Legislature is Assembly Bill 546, called the Right to Farm Bill, which updated an existing statute. Rep. David Ward, a Republican dairy farmer from Fort Atkinson, sponsored the bill in response to farmers suffering under complaints and lawsuits from new suburban neighbors who don't like farm sights, sounds and smells.

The law clarifies how courts may regulate farming activities if they are found to be a nuisance. It requires plaintiffs to pay farmers' legal costs if the activities are not found to be a nuisance.

In the 1997 biennium, Rep. Ward said he is interested in sponsoring a bill that would allow farmers who sell out to deposit some of their farm profits into Individual Retirement Accounts without paying capital gains taxes. He is also considering sponsoring a "takings" bill that would increase compensation rates paid to farmers forced to forfeit land to municipalities for roads, industrial developments, etc.
Things You Can Do to Support Rural Communities

Here are several things that pastors, parish councils, parish staffs and Catholics can do to help rural communities as they experience the impact of a decrease in farming and its related agricultural economy and an increase in migration of non-farm families:

1. **Support dialogue and relationships between farmers and nonfarmers**-- Suburbanites often get aggravated over farm smells and farmers' slow-moving equipment on roads. Discussion between farm and non-farm neighbors improves understanding about why these things happen and helps diffuse the impatience and animosity that erode community life.

   Parishes can support relationships between farmers and nonfarmers by sponsoring an annual "day on the farm" where parishioners can visit a family farm and learn about the animals, equipment, etc. Parishes can sponsor a monthly or weekly farmer’s market in the parish parking lot where local farmers could sell their wares.

2. **Build up community life** -- support the creation and maintenance of public activities and facilities like sidewalks, swimming pools, playgrounds, libraries, ice rinks, hospitals, parks, bikepaths, community festivals, and parades.

3. **Support marriage** -- this leads to stable families and communities.

   For example, parishes can sponsor an annual day of reflection or retreat for married couples. Or as a way to support young couples, the parish could sponsor a "couples night out" and provide free in-parish babysitting one night a month so young couples can have an evening alone without the children.

4. **Support parenting** -- affirm the primacy of parents in a child's life. Support parents needs/desire to protect children from unwanted influences, experiences. This should not be limited to church discussions. Parishes can publicly support/oppose issues in the public arena that affect parents and families.

   For example, parishes can support non-alcoholic community prom and homecoming parties for high schoolers. Or, support a weekday "family night" where all community groups agree to not schedule activities so families can have one weekday evening free of outside demands. In many communities this has guaranteed that families have at least one night a week where parents and children can sit down together for supper.

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5. **Stabilize jobs** -- foster diversity of the local employment base so that the community is not stunned by closure of family farms and their related agricultural businesses. Other employment options also give farm families the ability to stay in the community when they leave farming.

Parish councils can help stabilize the job pool by lending moral and vocal support to local chamber of commerce efforts to woo new employers. For example, parish council members can act as parish ambassadors and offer to meet with potential new employers when they tour the community. If a local employer closes, parishes can make their facilities available for community meetings or as locations for worker retraining efforts.

6. **Stabilize housing** -- help foster mixed housing options for families. Rural communities need diverse housing options as families change size and weather increases and decreases in financial resources. This means the availability of apartments when home ownership is no longer possible for farm families, as well as affordable "starter homes" when young people move off the farm and start families of their own.

Parishes can help stabilize housing by encouraging local governments to approve plans to build affordable or subsidized housing. Apartment buildings and inexpensive, simple starter homes are often opposed by suburbanites who settle in once rural areas. The migrants use their city-earned wealth to build huge homes and subsequently drive up the cost of real estate beyond the reach of the rural "natives."

7. **Provide an economic safety net** -- churches can organize to provide food or special funds, finding sensitive ways to offer help, reminding the family that they have given help to others in the past and they can now receive help from the community.

8. **Support the principle of subsidiarity**, which is the ethic that no larger organization or entity should do what can be done by a smaller group or entity closer to the problem -- let and encourage local communities to set their own standards of decency, behavior, and expectations in community life, politics and social activities.

For example, parishes can encourage local schools to set standards of behavior for student conduct and to set policies and plan activities that respond to parents needs and concerns, rather than doing nothing or leaving such work to county or state government.

This list was created by the staff of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference with input from Catholic farmers in Wisconsin; the University of Wisconsin Agricultural Technology and Family Farm Institute; the National Catholic Rural Life Conference; and Churches' Center for Land and People.