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The Effects of the Agricultural Crisis on
the Health and Lives of Farm Families



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The Effects of the Agricultural Crisis on
the Health and Lives of Farm Families

STATEMENT OF

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Washington, D.C.

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(Prepared for a hearing before members of the Committee on Agriculture, United States House of Representatives. Presented at the Coffee for Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek and other distinguished guests held prior to the hearing and sponsored by WIFE, Women Involved in Farm Economics.)

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am very pleased to be invited to make this presentation to you. In so doing, I will share with you some of the preliminary results of a study my husband and I are in the process of analyzing. The study focused on farm families who left farming for financial reasons.

First, allow me to introduce myself. I am Judith Bortner Heffernan. I am a Research Associate in the Department of Rural Sociology of the University of Missouri, Columbia. For most of the last 16 years I have been teaching courses in marriage and family life education, and other sociology courses, to college and university students.

Although raised a city girl in eastern Indiana, I am now a partner in the soybean, wheat and beef cattle farm on which we live near Kingdom City, in Callaway County, Missouri.

My husband, Professor William Heffernan, is a former farm boy from Bremer County, Iowa. He and I and our 14 year old daughter, Lisa, do the farming on the 450 acres which we own and rent. We are one of the 92 percent of American farm families who have off-farm income. My personal involvement in our farming operation has led to my professional research interest in the key roles played in American agriculture by farm women and farm families. I am also a longtime supporter of farm women's organizations and a proud member of WIFE.

Introduction to the Survey of Families Leaving Farming

While the economic costs and impacts of the crisis in Rural America have been and continue to be fairly well-identified, neither the social and emotional costs to families nor the social impacts on communities have been well-documented. Through a cooperative agreement between the

United States Department of Agriculture and the University of Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, we sought to determine some of the consequences for farm families of the continuing crisis in Rural America.

In January, 1985, a county in north central Missouri was selected to be the focus of a study of farm families leaving farming. The county was selected because it was one of the 17 counties in the state which combine to produce 50 percent of Missouri's agricultural products and because it was over 50 miles from a metropolitan area, a distance typically considered to be about the upper range for commuting to off-farm jobs.

As the interviewer, I went into the county and compiled a list of all families who had quit farming between January 1, 1980 and January 1, 1985. Names were sought from the Extension Service, the FLB, PCA, SCS, ASCS, and FmHA, as well as the auctionneers and private bankers in the county. As the interviewing was taking place, the interviewed families were asked to identify others who had quit in the five year period.

Around 60 names were on the original list. Some were found to have quit farming before 1980 and others since January 1 of this year. Others, it was discovered, had been forced by their lenders to hold a farm sale, but had managed to keep a small amount of old machinery and were going to try to farm this year on a few acres not yet taken back by the lenders or ones they could rent from a neighbor.

The final list of eligible families consisted of 46 families, 42 of which were interviewed. Two families had apparently left the area under very difficult circumstances and were not traceable. One family was not contacted for an interview because of very severe recent illness. Only one family refused to be interviewed, citing a desire to be helpful, but an unwillingness to relive what was a very painful and traumatic

experience for them. Of the 42 interviewed, two had retired. One of these two was in severe financial trouble when he quit. For purposes of our present analysis, these two families have not been included.

In at least 44 of the 46 families, the major reason for getting out of farming was financial. Although those interviewed were never directly asked if they had been foreclosed, a significant number volunteered that they had been forced to liquidate by their lender. The remaining ones got out "while we still had something left." Most of them spoke of continually losing money since 1979.

Characteristics of the Farm Families

While the couples interviewed ranged in age from 22 to 64, 75 percent of the husbands and 84 percent of the wives were less than 45 years of age. Ninety percent of the husbands (only 38 percent of the wives) have grown up on a farm and 59 percent gave that as the major reason why they started farming.

With regard to education, only eight percent of the men and five percent of the women had less than 12 years of schooling. Thirty percent of the men and 35 percent of the women had more than 12 years of schooling.

The families had an average of 2.9 children with an average of 2.1 children still living at home. Ninety percent of the families still had at least one child at home.

Today, almost half (45 percent) of the families say they are less active than the average citizen in community groups, organizations or clubs. Most of them said that when they were farming, they were much more active.

Ninety-two percent of the men and women reported they were members of a church. Two-thirds of the men and three-fourths of the women indicated they attended church at least once a month and 42 percent of the men and 58 percent of the women indicated they attended at least once a week.

Characteristics of the Family Farming Operations

Sixty-eight percent of the families started farming after 1965 and one-half started farming in the 70s or 80s. Fifty-eight percent began farming by renting all of their land and over half began farming with another family member, usually their parents.

The median size of farming operation when the farm was the largest was about 500 acres. Of this, about 200 acres were owned and 300 acres were rented. The largest farming operation was 2,150 acres. The largest acreage owned was 537 acres.

Fifty-seven percent of the farmers received most of their farm income from corn, wheat, sorghum and soybeans. About one-third of them received most of their income from hogs. A few farmers received their major income from beef and six percent reported that they received about equal income from crops and livestock.

Ninety-two percent of the families indicated they had intended for the farm to provide for most of the family's income, but even when the farm was the largest, one-third of the men and one-half of the women earned non-farm income. One-fourth of the women contributed at least half of the family's total income from their non-farm job. The farm was the only source of family income for only 34 percent of the families.

During the last year of farming, 60 percent of the men and 57 percent of the women had a non-farm job. The farm remained the only source of family income for 20 percent of the families.

Only 18 percent of the farmers indicated that they had bought some new equipment when they started farming or since 1975, whichever was more recent. Eighty-seven percent said they bought used equipment and almost two-thirds borrowed some equipment from a relative. Almost thirty percent borrowed some equipment from a neighbor.

Ten percent felt they could have kept their farm if they could have gotten a non-farm job, but 50 percent said they could not have kept their farm even if they had had a non-farm job. Although 60 percent of the men had non-farm incomes, only 40 percent indicated they had a full time job.

Forty-four percent indicated 1979 was their best year. Only 19 percent listed a year in the 1980s as their best year, reflecting both bad weather conditions and the depressed condition of the agricultural economy. No one listed 1982 or 1983.

Seventy percent of the respondents could think of assistance that would have helped them to stay in farming. Almost one-fourth of all respondents said they could have stayed in farming if interest rates were lower. Eighteen percent felt FmHA could have been fairer and could have reorganized their loans. Others discussed the need for higher commodity prices and agricultural policy more favorable to farmers. It should be noted that several of the farmers thought the situation in agriculture was so hopeless and the solution to the problems so unlikely that they felt nothing could be done to keep them and many others in farming.

Social and Emotional Consequences of the Rural Crisis on Farm Families

Family Stress: It is difficult to overstate the tremendous amount of stress experienced by farm families as they are forced to give up their farms and their way of life.

When asked how much the stress in their family had increased in the process of leaving the farm, the families reported an average of 8.1 on a scale of 0 (meaning no particular increase) to 9 (meaning an enormous increase). When asked how concerned they were with the effects of stress on their family, the respondents indicated much concern by averaging 7.6 on a scale of 0 (no concern) to 9 (a great deal of concern).

Behavioral reactions to stress were self-reported by farm men and women. The data in the table indicate both the percentages of those who have experienced the behavior and those who continue to experience it.

Note that 97 percent of the men and 100 percent of the women indicate they became depressed. Over 50 percent of the men and 72 percent of the women still experience depression. As we would predict, almost two-thirds of the respondents reported "withdrawing from family and friends."

Half of the men and one-third of the women reported they became more physically aggressive. Three-fourths of the men and 69 percent of the women reported experiencing feelings of worthlessness. Sixty-six percent of the men and 81 percent of the women reported experiencing "great changes in moods." The majority also experienced sleeping and eating problems.

About one-fourth of the men and women indicated they had increased smoking. Eighteen percent of the men and 12 percent of the women said they experienced an increase in their drinking.

Over one-half of the men and about one-third of the women reported they became confused. A third of the men and women said they became unable to think or respond logically.

Although these families are no longer farming, they still report about half of the stress symptoms they experienced as they were ceasing the farming operation.

Social workers who have looked at the data are surprised by both the high levels of stress reactions reported and by the continuing levels. They believe that these data indicate a level of stress and perhaps even crisis that must be dealt with in order for these individuals to be able to meet the demands of their changing lives.

Relationships of Stress to Illness: Going beyond these data for just a moment, allow me to note that medical science is increasingly reporting the clear relationship between stress and illness. Researchers generally acknowledge that upwards from 50 percent of illnesses are stress related.

It is important to mention this relationship, because reports from Extension field staff in various areas of rural America tell us that financially pressed farm families are dropping their medical insurance. These families seek to meet their medical needs in the offices of county health departments.

As the tax base in rural counties erodes, county governments are being forced to cut back services, usually including public health services. One rural Missouri county reports that two years ago there were 10 health professionals in the county. Now there are two, a public health nurse and her secretary, both part-time. Clearly, the health of rural America is threatened by this deteriorating condition.

Marital Conflict: Four of the families in our study were either now divorced or about to be. In every case, conflict between the husband and wife over the farming situation was cited as a significant contributing factor to the divorce.

In other families, the couple noted that marital conflict had indeed increased as the farm situation worsened. Some seemed surprised that the marriage had so far survived the strain.

Impact on Children: One of the relatively undiscussed social costs of the rural crisis is the impact it is having on the children. We asked parents if they had noticed changes in the behaviors of their children and if so what had they noticed. Fifty-six percent answered yes. (Among those answering no were the older families whose children had been gone from home for some years.) It was obvious to me as I observed the scene that some parents were either denying the impact on their children or were so engrossed in handling their own stress that they were oblivious to their children's pain.

Parents who did report changes in their children noted that school grades went down and children's anxieties and fears increased. Demands for attention, crying, rebelliousness, sleep disorders, aggressiveness--all increased.

It was reported that adolescent children, in addition to the above changes, also increased their use of alcohol, became more withdrawn and bitter over diminished social status and being forced to move and change schools. Some teens would try to forego needed shoes and clothing in order to "do anything" to help the family's financial situation. Children reportedly became "very sad" and seemed to "lose their innocence."

Sons who had been active in 4-H and FFA and who planned to farm the family farm became very angry with their parents. They believe that their future as farmers was being denied them by the family's loss of the farm.

Extension Agriculturalist, Donald Bailey, of the Northeast Missouri Extension Area has compiled a list of changes in children noted by the school systems in the area. This list includes the following:

1. Stress shows on students of all ages - principal reporting
2. Large increase in free lunches - 3 counties reporting
3. Noticeable need for medical attention in some children - 2 counties
4. Need for dental work - 2 counties
5. Students "gobble up" school lunches - 1 county
6. Students come to school hungry - 2 counties
7. Students no longer complain about school lunches - 1 county
8. One school has an agreement with a discount store and a service club to buy shoes for those farm youngsters who need them or any other student.
9. One school is working out an eye glasses purchase plan for students with a local service club. Many students need glasses--a note is sent home--nothing happens.

Level of Social Support of the Farm Family

Of critical importance to families and individuals undergoing major changes in their lives is the amount of social support available to them. Such support is one of the best mechanisms for coping with stress.

Eighty-seven percent of our respondents indicated there were family members or acquaintances who seemed to understand and with whom they could discuss their situation. On the other hand, two-thirds indicated there were persons with whom they tried to discuss the situation who did not understand or were not concerned.

Only five families (12 percent) indicated that a church, other organizations, or government agencies offered or provided them with any assistance during the time they were leaving farming. The assistance

included student grants, money loaned or given, stress seminars and counseling.

The majority of respondents indicated that their parents, their children, other relatives, close friends, neighbors and the community were supportive during this time. However, the majority indicated that their church was either "not supportive" or "condemned them". Lenders were placed about equally in the four categories ranging from "not at all supportive" to "actively expressed support for the family".

When reflecting on what others had done for them that was most helpful, respondents most often mentioned being listened to, encouraged and provided with emotional support. Helping with the sale, giving money, food or more time to repay the loans were also listed.

Assessment of Current and Future Well-Being

Twelve of the 40 respondents have moved from the county. Five have moved to contiguous counties, two to other counties in Missouri and five to other states. Of these who have left the county, all but one (a laborer) are in occupational categories classified as professional, managerial, sales, technical or are college students. All but one of these families has moved to a town or city.

Twenty-eight of the 40 respondent families continue to live in the county. Of these, five have moved into town. Five have moved to other rural locations, including one who has been forced to move in with relatives. Eight are in the same home they lived in when they farmed and they will likely continue to live there.

Ten of the families still living in the county are in a situation that could only be described as "limbo". They continue to live in the

farm house, but only until their lender who has foreclosed on them finds a buyer for the property or asks them to move.

Although a few of those who continue living in the county have continued the skilled jobs which they held while farming, for most who remain, the picture is not as encouraging. A few have found work they feel good about and like. Two have gone to college. Five are essentially unemployed and most of the remainder are, at best, underemployed.

Relative to January of 1980, 48 percent of the families feel their financial condition today is "much worse" and 15 percent said "worse." Twenty-eight percent said their financial condition was better. The families were a little more positive regarding their family's satisfaction with its quality of life. Forty percent said it was better. A few noted that the anxiety and uncertainty over farming was now largely over. Seventy-nine percent of the families hope they will be better off in five years.

Eighteen percent of the families report their current income is not at all adequate. Thirty-eight percent can meet necessities only. Another 35 percent can afford some of the things they want, but not all the things they want. Eight percent can afford about everything they want and perhaps even save a little money.

Hints at the Impact of the Rural Crisis on Rural Communities

Although most of the discussion today has dealt with the impact of the agricultural crisis on farm families, problems resulting from this situation are increasingly being experienced by rural communities.

As the financial troubles of farmers increase, they reduce their purchases from agribusiness firms, as well as from other businesses. The financial condition of these firms then becomes critical. The closings of businesses on Main Street in small rural towns gives evidence of this. Stress among retailers mounts. Within the last few weeks, a Missouri implement dealer who had received his foreclosure notice took his own life.

Another important problem created for rural communities by bankrupt farmers is the proportion of their debts which are not paid in full. A recent study in Iowa found that on the average a farmer leaves \$77,000 of unsecured debt when he is forced to quit farming.

In our study, seventy percent of the farmers reported having borrowed from commercial banks and FmHA. Over half (57 and 68 percent respectively) indicated they had not paid these banks in full. Fifty percent of the farmers had borrowed from other agribusiness firms such as seed and implement dealers. Fifty-seven percent said they had not paid these debts in full. Some related persons, non-related persons, landlords and PCA and FLB accounts had also not been paid in full.

Clearly, problems for farmers and farm families became problems for all those dependent on agribusinesses and all other businesses in rural America.

With the private sector deteriorating, it is not long before the public sector is affected. Rural newspapers chronicle the stories of property values declining and tax bases eroding. Officials are often faced with declining populations of taxpayers and shrinking public revenues at the same time the fixed costs of running county governments

and school districts are increasing. As a result, county services are being cut at a time when there is increasing need for them.

To summarize, the so-called "farm crisis" is indeed causing profound pain and suffering among the farming families most directly affected by it. It seems clear that in many families, two generations of farmers are being forced off the farm. In their wake, the impact of their departure on every institution in their rural communities is becoming clearer. The fabric of rural society in agricultural communities is being threatened.

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING COMMON REACTIONS TO
STRESS DURING RECENT TIMES

Reactions	Have Experienced		Continue to Experience	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
a. Became depressed	97	100	56	72
b. Became withdrawn from family/friends	61	66	26	41
c. Became nauseous, lost appetite	49	47	18	34
d. Could fall asleep at night, but would awake and be unable to return to sleep	77	53	41	38
e. Experienced feelings of worthlessness	74	69	49	41
f. Became restless, unable to concentrate, agitated	72	81	41	38
g. Did anything to keep busy	67	41	46	31
h. Increased smoking	23	25	18	22
i. Increased drinking	18	12	10	6
j. Showed increased fear of things, people	38	31	18	25
k. Became more physically aggressive	49	31	26	9
l. Experienced great changes in moods, from low to high and back	67	81	36	47
m. Became confused	54	31	31	19
n. Became unable to think or respond logically	31	34	13	19
o. Became unusually silent for periods of time	62	53	44	28

