

columns

Visioning the Upper Delaware River Valley

Losing our future

By R.A.DUBENSKY

"Are you well fed? Thank God. Then thank a farmer." I saw that bumper sticker on the back of a truck recently. The American dream of "working hard and working smart leads to success" no longer applies to our dairy farmers. Drive along any country road in Sullivan, Wayne, Pike, or Orange County and you will see abandoned farms with their fields overgrown with brush and weeds or dotted with housing developments.

Dairy farming in our area has always been more than a job; it has been a way of life. American farm policy for the past 25 years has choked dairy farmers sufficiently to prevent them from making a decent living. In the past few years, the government has finally succeeded in suffocating them by destroying their way of life. A fourth-generation farmer recently told me that he is finished. There will be no fifth generation on that farm. No one to follow in his footsteps. Sadly, he doesn't even want someone to try.

Farmers only asked to be paid a fair price for their milk. The price of milk a farmer is paid today is lower than it was when I graduated from veterinary college 25 years ago. No farmer willingly sold their land. It was their future and without a future in dairying, what hope is there? The average age of farmers in America is 57 years old. Less than 1 percent of the population is involved in agriculture. It is predicted that this trend will continue and I believe that we will suffer as a result for several reasons.

First is the loss of farmland. This land is not a renewable resource. Once the land is developed, it cannot be cultivated. Our country is just beginning to take real measures to lessen our dependence on foreign oil. What about the dependence we are creating regarding our food supply? Scientific advancements in food production will not be able to keep up with a growing population and dwindling land base. I wonder if we are simply replacing one dependence for another with potentially more serious consequences.

Second is the loss of our farmers. Who will be left to manage the land if we continue to drive farmers out of business? Dairy farmers epitomize the best in American workers – intelligence, diligence, common sense, and independence. These men and women are the smartest and hardest working people I have ever met. An engineer who works for Budweiser told me that Budweiser owns 11 metal container plants in the United States and the most profitable plant is located in Wisconsin. Most of the workers in that plant grew up on dairy farms.

Third is the loss of our heritage. At the beginning of the 20th century, 90 percent of our population was involved with agriculture. Of course we are no longer an agrarian society. However, as we become alienated from our past, we become more isolated in our present. Farmland is sacred and it is entitled to be preserved for all future generations.

How can it be cheaper to import dairy products from New Zealand than to buy them from a farmer in your own community? How are countries like Canada, France, Germany, and England able to insure the survival of their dairy farms? I fear that it may be too late to address the crisis in the dairy industry unless we make it a priority. Lastly, thank a farmer if you are well fed—if you can find one.

(R.A. Dubensky manages a mixed animal veterinary practice based in Milford, PA. Along with a friend, he owns a small herd of beef cattle producing natural gourmet beef for local consumption.)

This bi-weekly column is a part of a valley-wide initiative to encourage an engaged citizenry. For a complete archive of visioning statements and for more about the visioning initiative visit upperdelaware.com.