

Josh Nett: The future of agriculture

Posted on Monday, Aug 6, 2018

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In June I attended the Wisconsin State FFA Convention in Madison to watch our oldest son receive a gold award in Dairy Proficiency. I am always impressed with how the FFA continues to help shape and inspire tomorrow's leaders. The enthusiasm that these young people have for agriculture is nothing short of amazing. "In the promise of better days through better ways" is a line from the famous FFA creed written in 1928. What a powerful statement — and yet as I look at the current state of our dairy industry I question if we've done enough. Or have we done just as was expected from us? Are we satisfied that we've created an industry that is trending toward having tens of thousands of cows, with our farms and farm land increasingly owned by outside investors?

I'm still convinced that the future of agriculture depends on giving a young person a chance to build a good herd of cattle or a good farm from the ground up or to become the next generation to gain an appreciation for the hard work and the commitment that takes a lifetime to develop. Yes, some will try and fail, but some will succeed. Some will persevere to pass the love and knowledge for agriculture down to future generations. However, none of this is achievable unless we work to reshape our dairy industry.

I don't think we have to continue down this path of continued consolidation and outside investment in agriculture. I believe there is a place for family farms on the land. I believe in an alternate future for dairy farmers — one other than this rollercoaster we've been on. One where fair, stable prices are the norm rather than the exception. But I believe my fellow farmers and others in our agricultural community need to take a hard look at where we are headed and band together for change if we are going to change course.

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That's why I'll be among the Wisconsin dairy farmers who will board a bus and travel to Albany, New York Aug. 12-14 to join other farmers from across the country for a hard look at federal-level solutions to the dairy crisis. Cooperatives, legislators, farmers and others with a stake in the future of dairy will all be at the table. The meeting is being held by the farmer-owned cooperative Agri-Mark, and the bus trip is part of a Dairy Together effort by Wisconsin Farmers Union that has brought together farmers from different organizations across Wisconsin — and other states — with a vision of rebuilding a viable dairy economy for family farmers and our rural communities.

If you, too, look ahead and worry about where our dairy industry is headed and wonder if the next generation has a future on your farm ... I hope you'll consider joining this effort. Let's fill the bus and do all that we can to stop this trend of losing 500 dairy herds each year in Wisconsin. Contact Wisconsin Farmers Union Government Relations Associate Bobbi Wilson at bwilson@wisconsinfarmersunion.com or 608-234-3741 to save your spot on the bus!

"In the promise of better days through better ways."

— Josh Nett milks 250 cows and farms 400 acres with his wife, Terri, on their Waushara County farm. They have two teenage sons who also are involved in the farm. Josh started farming in 1993 and bought his current farm in 2007. He grew up helping his grandparents on their dairy farm.