

Daniel Smith: Cooperative effort needed to build a better tomorrow for rural communities

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The phrase most uttered by those involved in Wisconsin agriculture as the 2019 growing season fades into the past has to be, “Good riddance!”

From the dairy barn to the cranberry bog, from the cornfield to the co-op, the challenges of weather and markets in 2019 were overwhelming. It is an unfortunate fact of agriculture that what impacts a farmer the most is also what he or she can least control. Wisconsin agriculture has absorbed a flurry of punches in the form of adverse weather, international trade disputes and low prices over the past few years.

Those punches have taken their toll. Last year, Wisconsin lost an average of two dairy farms per day. Looking back further, Wisconsin has lost more than 40,000 dairy farms over the past 40 years. The impact, though, has not been felt in the grocery aisle – where quality dairy products and other foods are abundant and available at a cost other countries envy.

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Rather, the impact has been the decline of our rural communities. The farm families who once filled the schools, shopped on Main Street, supported and served on the cooperative, town and school boards are far fewer. We have failed to find a way to replace them. Over the years, as agriculture, light manufacturing and consumer purchasing methods changed, we advanced in some geographic regions and

economic sectors; we regressed in others, mainly rural, mainly reliant on agriculture.

According to UW-Madison economist Steven Deller, between 1963 and 2016, the whole of the Wisconsin economy grew some 298%. It is difficult to find much evidence of that growth in our rural counties.

It is ironic that the availability of fresh food in our rural areas is half of what it is in urban areas. One would expect the opposite, that the closer one is to the land that feeds us, the better we would be fed. The impact of this is far-reaching and significant. One in four children in rural areas of our nation lives in poverty. Nearly 45% of the heart disease deaths in rural America are deemed preventable, compared to 18% in urban areas. Talk about a rural/urban divide!

Since the end of World War II, American agriculture has consolidated, vertically integrated and mechanized; other industries have done the same. We could throw up our hands and accept the impact of these changes - or we could come together to revitalize our rural economy.

As a nation, we have few reservations about spending money. Our national debt continues to escalate but generally receives little attention. Economists can argue both sides of that issue, but it is obvious our nation's infrastructure lacks investment. It is like a homeowner on a spending spree while failing to replace the faulty furnace, the leaky roof, the cracked foundation.

Like most things in life, it is a matter of priorities. To start, we must emphasize communities, cooperation and communication. Broadband access is essential for all three. In today's world, education, business development, health services and culture all travel on the Internet pathway. Just as the rural electric cooperatives turned on the lights for rural communities decades ago, broadband is the illuminating force for today.

We must protect our natural resources. Healthy soils are a requirement of successful farming. Healthy soils lead to clean water, reduced production costs and diversified growing systems. I have heard it said that today's farmer is two generations removed from farming good soil. If that is true, we need to start the recovery process at once!

We must combine career opportunities with lifestyle choices and culture in order to

attract new residents to our rural communities. A clean running trout stream, biking and hiking trails, cultural events and other lifestyle enhancements are powerful incentives when choosing a place to live. Create it, and they will come.

There are other challenges as well. The housing stock in our small towns has depreciated greatly since the 2008 recession. Good, affordable housing is a necessity for attracting a workforce tied to local businesses. Child care, elder care and other support systems for the family must be in place. Sometimes, it actually does take a village.

We can look back and reminisce about what once was on our farms and in our rural communities. Or, we can look ahead, join cooperatively, and build a better tomorrow. Our forefathers did it. We can, too.

-Smith is president and chief executive officer of the Cooperative Network.