

# waterfrontline

The water's edge is the front line.

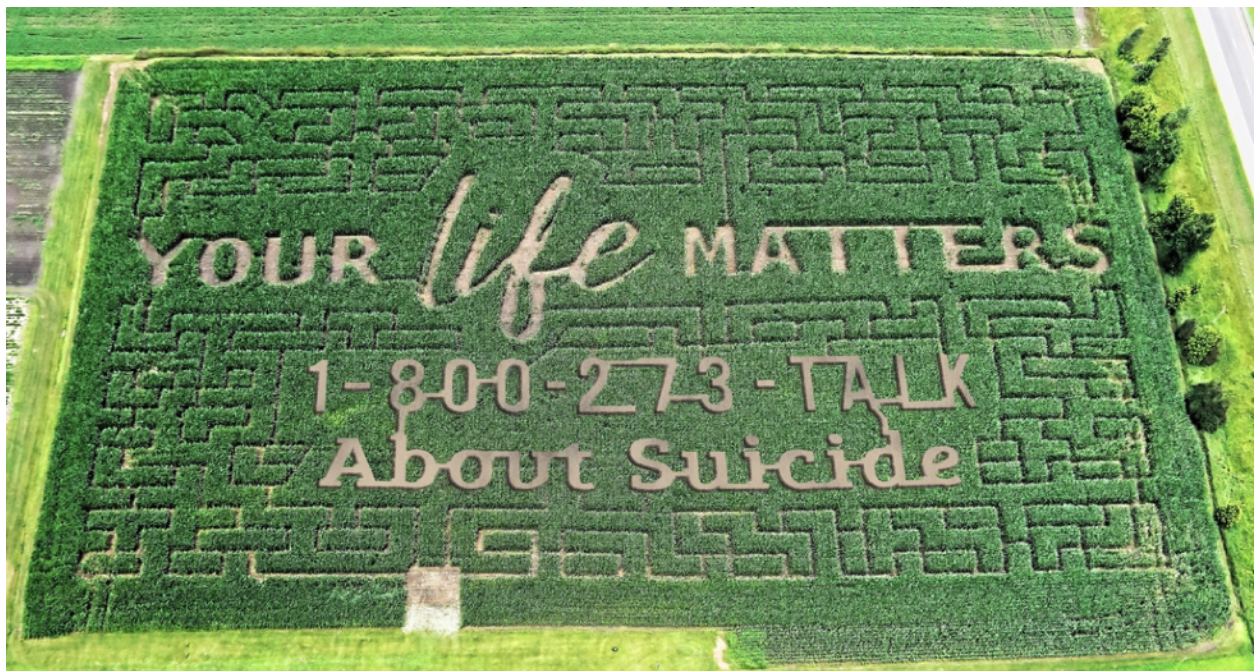
Can we talk: Farmers, suicide, and help.

Posted to <http://waterfrontline.com>

All rights reserved. May not be reprinted or reposted to any domain but waterfrontline.com.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily represent official policy, practices, or position of any company or organization with which I have ever been affiliated.

Is climate change contributing to increases in suicide rates of farmers? It's not as direct a correlation as that, but there is no doubt that climate changes amplify many of the risk factors already damaging the farm economy, and those factors in turn exacerbate the risks associated with suicide. In response to the patterns they are seeing, farmers are doing what they always do: taking matters into their own hands, challenging leaders and reaching out to their communities to actively support those in need. And while they are at it, they are helping everyone else in the process. As farmers do.



*Corn maze at Govin's Farm, Menomonie, Wisconsin, 2019. Image from their Facebook page.*

Rather than rely on retrospective studies as the foundation, in this discussion we'll start with a consideration of the most common risk factors that increase the number of suicide attempts and their lethality (see <https://www.sprc.org/about-suicide/risk-protective-factors>). Then we'll consider how those factors are particularly impacted in the climate-influenced farm economy of today, and how the farming community is taking action across the population.

According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, major risk factors for suicide include

- Prior suicide attempts
- Misuse of alcohol and other drugs
- Mental disorders, particularly depression
- Access to lethal means
- Knowing someone who died by suicide
- Social isolation
- Lack of access to behavioral health care
- Financial stress (especially due to unemployment or divorce)

Just considering those last 3: In today's free-market farm economy, small independent farmers cannot compete with industrial farms, and thousands of them are closing each year (*for example, 2700 family dairy farms closed in 2018. See <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/06/business/borden-dairy-bankruptcy/index.html>*). The remaining farmers are dealing with financial stress and increasing physical isolation as their neighbors leave. Local stores move when many of their customers are gone, and churches, clinics and schools shut down due to lack of headcount. The remaining farmers are left more isolated, with less access to health care and weakened access to their prior social safety net. And for those who lose the farm it is not just losing a job; it is losing the family farm, the family business and the inheritance built by parents and grandparents. Any subsequent unemployment has been found to be directly correlated with earlier mortality (*in study after study. See, for example, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4677456/>*). The risk factors compound.

Rural workers in the US have a high probability of lethality during suicide attempts because they are likely to have ready access to guns (*see <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/research/guns-and-suicide/>*). The access to firearms combines with other factors — economic instability, uneven access to health care — to increase the likelihood that when suicide is attempted, it will be successful. Being isolated for long periods while armed is dangerous to your health. In a study of farmer suicides in Georgia, 78% were by gun (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-12789-001>).

Physical isolation leads to social isolation. Comparing the population density of the 50 US states and their per capita suicide rates, there's a pretty striking correlation for many states (*source: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm>*).

The states with the lowest population density, and their ratings in terms of suicides per capita (across all professions):

State	Ranking for suicides per capita	Ranking for sparseness
Montana	1	3
Alaska	2	1
Wyoming	3	2
New Mexico	4	6
Idaho	5	7
Utah	6	11
South Dakota	7	5

At the other end of the spectrum, the most densely populated states have the lowest rankings in terms of suicides per capita:

State	Ranking for suicides per capita	Ranking for sparseness
California	45	40
Connecticut	46	47
Maryland	47	46
Massachusetts	48	48
New Jersey	49	50
New York	50	44

*(Note: This pattern is consistent for the states in the middle as well, with some exceptions. Since states are not uniform in their geography or their population distribution, there are cases where a state's ranking is higher or lower than would be expected. For those states, a more accurate measure would be to look at the data by the individual's zip code and the population density by zip code. That would require a multi-year view in order to have an adequate number of deaths to include. For this article, the general sparseness view is accurate because it applies adequately to the states at the ends of the spectrum.)*

This is not to imply that simply living more densely reduces mortality rates (indeed, it increases other types of mortality risk); but rather, that concentrated populations in first world countries with adequate resources build places that provide mutual care and support, from schools to libraries, churches, gyms, clinics, roadside stands, corner stores, barber shops, hardware stores, coffee houses and veterans' halls. For a full discussion of social infrastructure and its impacts, see the book Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life by Eric Klinenberg.

All these factors were already impacting farmers. And then the climate changed. The farmers carrying their family's burdens in a hostile economic climate looked around and saw four things:

- physically, they were more alone than ever before,
- any help they might need had moved further away,
- trade wars were taking away the markets they relied on for their income,
- and the climate had changed.

Seeing all those warning signs, they reached out to leaders and to each other.

For example: along the Missouri River in 2019, as the waters from the early spring storms flooded downstream, farms had fields of grain washed away or buried by silt, and already full crop stores wrecked. With roads and bridges washed out, dairy farmers found themselves requiring multiple hours of detours just to get to their own herds every day. Some residents concluded that the climate risk to their lives and livelihood had reached a breaking point, and that the time window for addressing that risk was short. At an October 2019 meeting between midwestern residents and the Army Corps of Engineers (see [https://www.omaha.com/news/local/our-lives-have-been-destroyed-frustration-rises-with-missouri-river/article\\_392f0390-6c98-53c9-ba85-](https://www.omaha.com/news/local/our-lives-have-been-destroyed-frustration-rises-with-missouri-river/article_392f0390-6c98-53c9-ba85-)



[e3b7439d46f2.html](#)) the meeting's leaders were questioned by a longtime resident of Fremont County, Iowa:

*"Our lives have been destroyed," said 69-year-old Alice Hodde. "Do you know the human toll this takes on farmers? Suicide is a big thing. ... What's the price of a human life? Do you have an answer?"*

...

*"People need to know what this does to (us), what it costs a person," Hodde told corps officials gathered in a stone lodge in this historic town. "We've talked to our congressmen, our senators. Our little group in Fremont County (Iowa) wrote at least 800 letters. It's destroying us; something needs to change."*

Farmers usually depart their land in debt, having exhausted their lines of credit trying to keep the family farm alive. Each year, Govin's Farm in Menomonie, Wisconsin, has a corn maze as part of its features. For 2019, they customized it for their farm friends who had been touched by suicide — that's their corn maze at the top of this article — and their Facebook followers offered example after example where suicide had touched their family and work circles. They put it in writing for everyone to see: It's not just about farmers, but we're here to talk about it. Your life matters. Call for help.

To view the original Govin's post and the comments from people who shared similar experiences, see <https://www.facebook.com/govinsfarm/photos/a.365342318238/10156275150123239/?type=3&theater>

To date, that post has been shared 1,800 times.

In September, Govin's held a suicide awareness luminary walk in its corn maze (<https://spectrumnews1.com/wi/madison/news/2019/09/29/govin-s-farm-holds-suicide-awareness-event->)

Meanwhile, the open discussion of mental health and suicide prevention among farmers, ranchers, and others performing remote jobs in sparsely populated areas without social or financial support is spreading. In November of 2019, the Utah Farm Bureau listed it as a headline topic for their annual convention: (see <https://www.utahfarmbureau.org/Article/Utah-farmers-ranchers-talking-industrial-hemp-suicide-prevention-and-other-issues-at-2019-Utah-Farm-Bureau-convention>). The intent is to reach out, to form connections that can help someone get the help needed regardless of profession. This reflected the approach of Utah's new agriculture commissioner, who when profiled in June 2019 stated he wanted to raise awareness of farmer suicide given losses he had personally felt (see <https://www.ksl.com/article/46578494/new-utah-agriculture-commissioner-wants-to-raise-awareness-of-farmer-suicide>). In 2017, Utah ranked 11<sup>th</sup> for sparseness but was 6<sup>th</sup> for



## UTAH FARMERS & RANCHERS TALKING INDUSTRIAL HEMP, SUICIDE PREVENTION, AND OTHER ISSUES AT 2019 UTAH FARM BUREAU CONVENTION



suicides per capita. That's 663 suicide deaths in Utah in a year.

***NOTE: That's not to imply that most of those deaths were farmers. The deaths among farmers have disproportionately struck their communities during an already difficult time and have spurred them to take on a sensitive issue and take public leadership, to address it openly and benefit everyone.***

Are climate changes making things worse? The climate has changed the landscape, increased the physical isolation of small towns, and damaged the farming economy for those with the least ability to withstand the financial hit. Texas has had 500-year floods in each of the last 3 years. The Missouri River area through the center of the country was under a flood emergency for 279 days in 2019; along its banks, farm buildings were washed downriver along with grain and drowned livestock. Climate changes have impacted Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, Louisiana, Maryland, Alaska, California — see the other articles on [waterfrontline.com](http://waterfrontline.com) for illustrations. Floods separate farmers from their own fields, forcing long commutes to reach their stock. Climate changes turn small towns into islands by cutting off vital road and utility links, then cause significant damage to the homes of people who can least afford it. And they do so repeatedly, washing away rebuilding efforts and adding to mental health issues.

In October, 2019, Montana Senator Jon Tester and Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley introduced a bill (see <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bill/4820/text/ih>) called the Seeding Rural Resilience Act. Its stated purpose is to create a mental health campaign to address the suicide rates of ranchers and farmers. The bill calls for voluntary training of agency personnel and the creation of a task force to find out what is stressful and identify best practices for responding to that mental stress. Here is the most relevant text of those sections:

**“SEC. 224B. EMPLOYEE TRAINING PROGRAM TO MANAGE FARMER AND RANCHER STRESS.**

“(a) In General.—The Secretary shall establish a voluntary program to train employees of the Farm Service Agency, the Risk Management Agency, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the management of stress experienced by farmers and ranchers, including the detection of stress and suicide prevention.

“(b) Requirement.—Not later than 180 days after the date on which the Secretary submits a report on the results of the pilot program being carried out by the Secretary as of the date of enactment of this section to train employees of the Department in the management of stress experienced by farmers and ranchers, and based on the recommendations contained in that report, the Secretary shall develop a training program to carry out subsection (a).

“(c) Report.—Not less frequently than once every 2 years, the Secretary shall submit to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate a report describing the implementation of this section.”.

...

**SEC. 6. TASK FORCE FOR ASSESSMENT OF CAUSES OF MENTAL STRESS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR RESPONSE.**

(a) In General.—The Secretary shall convene a task force of agricultural and rural stakeholders at the national, State, and local levels—

- (1) to assess the causes of mental stress in farmers and ranchers; and
- (2) to identify best practices for responding to that mental stress.

(b) Submission Of Report.—Not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of this Act, the task force convened under subsection (a) shall submit to the Secretary a report containing the assessment and best practices under paragraphs (1) and (2), respectively, of subsection (a).

(c) Collaboration.—In carrying out this section, the task force convened under subsection (a) shall collaborate with nongovernmental organizations and State and local agencies.

The good news is that it is building a program that would train people to have what can be difficult conversations about mental health, and then sending them out into the world. That's a good thing. The initial target audience for this effort is the farming and ranching profession given their remoteness, but that training can be applied throughout every community you touch. Personnel performing that outreach should refer to works from the Journal of Rural Mental Health, such as "Challenges and Opportunities Associated With Rural Mental Health Practice" (see <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/rmh-0000002.pdf>).

The bill starts out with a clear list of contributing factors that are its inspiration. The opening answers the questions about causes that are later asked about in section 6.a.(1):

(2) farmers face social isolation, the potential for financial losses, barriers to seeking mental health services, and access to lethal means to commit suicide; and

(3) as commodity prices fall and farmers face uncertainty, reports of farmer suicides are increasing.

Given those as contributing factors, one could work to address:

- social isolation issues (through skilled personal outreach),
- financial loss issues (through market reforms for farms and addressing climate change),
- mental health services access (through health care reforms),
- access to lethal means (via gun control).

As written, the bill in its introductory form would only cover part of the first factor, as employees are trained to watch for potential stress issues (and as noted, that can benefit other populations). Solutions for the issues generating the observed stresses are not mentioned yet.

The bill has been referred to the House Agriculture Committee for review. No vote is scheduled.

In the meantime, take care of each other, proactively. If you see this topic in the news more often now, thank a farmer.

Your life matters. To talk about it, call 1-800-273-TALK.

For online resources specifically for farmers,  
see the Farm Crisis Center, <https://farmcrisis.nfu.org>

-----

Copyright 2020 waterfrontline.com.  
May not be reprinted. See copyright notice page for full details.