

It's beginning to look a lot like the 1980s?

In this post-holiday season and with apologies to Perry Como and the Fontaine Sisters who sang the Christmas standard "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," we'd like to make an unrhythmic play on the song's title.

As we read news stories coming from around farm country and speak at meetings of farm organizations, it seems to us that "it's beginning to look a lot like" the early stages of a serious farm crisis that could well mirror the farm crisis of the 1980's: increasing number of calls being received by farm crisis hotlines, a clear upswing in farm bankruptcies, a steep decline in net farm income, and most worrisome of all is the increase in farmer suicides.

In December, Harwood was invited to speak at a public meeting the Land Stewardship Project held in New Ulm, Minnesota. This meeting was planned by veterans of the farm crisis of 40 years ago who believe that farmers need to establish an agenda to get out in front of the troubles currently facing agricultural areas of the country.

They recalled the American Agriculture Movement's Tractorcade that brought farmers from all across rural America to gather on the National Mall to raise awareness of the precipitous 49 percent decline in net farm income between calendar years 1973 and 1978. Some told of the establishment of farm crisis hotlines in the early 80s. Others spoke of the organizing that it took to lobby the Minnesota Legislature to establish a farm debt mediation process for farmers who were being foreclosed on because they did not have enough income to make payments on all their debt. All recalled the loss of farmers who felt shame over the possibility of losing a farm that their grandfather had shepherded through the Great Depression.

The meeting organizers contacted us because they believed that the only solution to the growing crisis is a farm program that provides a price and the Agricultural Policy Analysis Center/Texas Farmers Union (APAC/TFU) proposal is the only proposal out there that can solve the farm price/income problem without resorting to an indefinite extension of the massive Market Facilitation Program probably under a different name.

Farm programs that establish a floor price on agricultural commodities are called supply management programs. Traditionally those programs were established by New Deal Democrats with the support of rural Republicans. At present, support for supply management programs exists only across a slice of Democratic legislators.

The goal in making the invitation was to familiarize the audience with some of the supply management mechanisms that would allow farmers to receive their income from the marketplace instead of the mailbox—in this electronic age, direct deposit from the Federal Government's till to the farmers bank account.

In addition to its support of farm prices—thus farm income—the APAC/TFU proposal would enable farmers to undertake land management practices that the Land Stewardship Project has encouraged since its inception. Care of the land and the farmers who derive their livelihood from it are two sides of the same coin.

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Dr. Harwood D. Schaffer: Adjunct Research Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tennessee and Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. Dr. Daryll E. Ray:

Emeritus Professor, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee and Retired Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center.

Email: hdschaffer@utk.edu and dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

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