

Written Testimony for the Joint Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee

Hearing on Farmer Mental Health

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Somerset County, Pennsylvania

Thank you, Chairman Vogel, Executive Director Ott, committee members, and distinguished guests for the opportunity to testify today.

I am not here as a credentialed expert of any kind. I am here simply as someone who has lived through farm loss, experienced the mental and emotional toll firsthand, and has since, because of a very bizarre twist of fate, spent the last few years touring the country, listening to hundreds of farmers tell similar stories.

Up until the spring of 2022, I was a fourth-generation dairy farmer milking cows on my family farm in Somerset County. That spring of 2022, economic pressures finally caught up to us, and I made the most difficult decision of my life: to shut down the dairy and to sell my beloved and beautiful Guernsey cows. I thought I was ready for that, but on the day of the sale, I began to experience feelings and emotions that I had never felt before. When the last of the cows, my stubborn little Dolly, was finally loaded onto the trailer and the trailer door slammed shut, reality began to set in. My life as a small dairy farmer was over.

When the truck pulled away from the barn that day, the best way I've come to describe this is that it literally felt as though something had been ripped out of me. And I must have led a charmed life up until that point because I honestly didn't know that you could feel so much physical pain from an emotional trauma.

In the days and weeks that followed the sale I was heartbroken, and I spiraled down into a deep depression filled with pain and anxiety. On a day I didn't think I could take the pain any longer, two things leaned against my bedroom wall: a loaded shotgun and my old guitar. Fortunately for me and my family I chose the guitar. Sadly, many farmers in similar circumstances are making another choice with famers now being three and half times more likely to commit suicide than the general public.

Now for that bizarre twist of fate I mentioned earlier. When I picked my guitar up that fateful day, I wrote a song really just as a way to get out all the pain and pent-up emotion I had inside and to somehow put into words what I was feeling. Little did I know at the time that

song, Empty Barn, would soon go viral, resonating with tens of thousands of people all over the country - mostly farmers and rural folks.

Empty Barn opened the door for me to start a new career as an independent music artist, keynote speaker, and farmer/rural mental health advocate. But I soon found out that Empty Barn was about far more than just me and my story. Touring the country performing and speaking made me acutely aware that we had a major problem because everywhere I went farmers were coming up to me wanting to tell me about their own stories of loss and grief, of the pain and heartache of shutting down a multi-generational operation, of losing their livelihoods, of losing their very identities. I cannot tell you how many people have stood in front of with tears streaming down their faces as they talk about their own loss. I found that somehow music opens people up to share. I do the only thing I can do which is to listen and to ask if they're ok.

In my experience, the obvious heart of the problem is that we're losing way too many farms, way too fast. I don't know what we can do about that, but I do know, as I'm sure you all do, many farms still operating are hanging on by a thread, causing even more general stress and anxiety and feelings of loss and hopelessness out there in the countryside. That is coupled with the fact that many farms still operating are hanging on financially by a thread which in and of itself also causes massive stress and anxiety. I'm here to tell you, to testify, that people are hurting.

The other part of the problem is that farmers, especially men - guys that look like me, don't really have any language for how to even ask for help when they are hurting and feeling stress and anxiety. As many of you well know, farmers are raised to grin and bear it. We believe in the virtue of self-reliance. We see ourselves as the strong ones for our families and we don't want to show or admit to perceived weakness. I can testify that those are great virtues and great things to live by in most aspects of farm life, but they are the absolute worst things to hold on to when it comes to your own mental health.

I thank God I had my guitar and songwriting to express myself. Somehow, we've got to give folks tools that allow them to ask for help and to get relief. I don't remember now where I heard this, but I think it's appropriate to this hearing. Ask a farmer what phone numbers are on speed dial in his phone and he's likely to say wife and family of course, followed closely by, mechanic, vet, seed and fertilizer dealer, etc. All people that help solve problems on the farm. (especially the Wife!) But is there even one number in that phone for any kind of mental health problem solving? (again, other than the wife!)

That's part of what needs to change. We've got to provide language and somehow normalize asking for help.

Lily had asked me to perform Empty Barn today, but we couldn't quite work out the logistics, so I'll leave you with a few of the lines that people either sing back to me in concert or tell me how much they affected them.

I can get used to not working every day.

I can get used to not needing to bale hay.

I can get used to some old job off the farm.

But I will never get used to this empty barn.

For all my growing up, it was a special place, where we started and ended every single day.

We always had a full house, ladies that we loved.

I tried hard to keep it going, wish I didn't have to be the one.

Of all the lines in the song, "Wish I didn't have to be the one" is the one line that hits a lot of folks the hardest. I wrote that line from my own lived experience, again having no idea that so many others were experiencing the same pain of loss. The same sense of leaving their families down, of leaving their communities down, and of leaving ancestors and forebearers down.

It's a heavy load to bear, I can tell you.

So, one last thing is that I mentioned earlier that I do a lot of listening these days. I challenge you, the next time you get a sense that your friend or neighbor isn't doing so well, maybe experiencing some of that weight, please take the time to look them in the eye, make a human connection and ask, "Are you ok?" Keep that eye contact and maybe add "If you're not ok, let's talk about it."

Thank you.