

**Testimony of
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On behalf of
Penn State Extension
and
Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences
for the
Joint Public Hearing of the House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees
Topic: Cultivating Wellness: Supporting Farmers Through the Mental Health Crisis
Presented on January 14, 2026
Keystone Conference Center, Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex -Erie Room**

Chairpersons and distinguished committee members, on behalf of Penn State Extension and the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State University, I want to thank you for your continued attention to and concern regarding the mental health of our agricultural community in Pennsylvania. I am an educator with the Penn State Extension dairy team and the co-lead of the Extension Farm Stress Team. My work in Extension began more than 25 years ago in food safety, which fueled my interest in pre-harvest food safety and occupational safety and health for dairy farmers. Our farm, which belonged to my grandparents, was formerly a dairy, where we now raise corn, soybeans, and finish market hogs.

I would like to follow Dr. Becot's overview of the mental health and well-being of Pennsylvania's agricultural community by sharing some of the ways in which Penn State Extension has responded and will continue to support our agricultural community. Penn State Extension is uniquely positioned to reach across all aspects of agricultural production in Pennsylvania; therefore, our response to farm stress and approach to farmer well-being should also be encompassing and broad.

Most of our efforts to support the mental health of agricultural communities are facilitated through the Penn State Farm Stress team. This team evolved from efforts that began in 2017, when some dairy team members and the Center for Dairy Excellence were having more conversations with farmers who needed someone to listen. We observed an increased concern about the loss of milk markets and a sustained decline in dairy markets. As of today, the team is comprised of 15 members, including extension educators from three units and faculty members. These team members bring a range of expertise, including ag safety and health, field and forage crops, dairy, and family well-being, along with a substantial network of connections within the agricultural sector across the state. Several Farm Stress team members are also part of the Northeast Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Extension cohort, *Cultivemos*, which has been an important avenue for learning about the work of other extension colleagues across the region and for

collaborating on common initiatives, including professional development opportunities. Besides some small grants to fund events and initiatives, the nature of the Farm Stress team programming does not readily lend itself to cost recovery. This is a group of committed and caring individuals, and I am proud to say that our efforts have been recognized by several national professional association awards and internally by Penn State Extension.

The resources provided by Penn State Extension aim to support the agricultural community as a whole; therefore, they target farmers and those connected to agriculture, including service providers and agencies locally, statewide, and beyond. In particular, we provide education about mental health challenges in agriculture, how to cope with them, and additional resources available for support. We often do this work in collaboration with outside partners such as the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Centers for Ag Excellence, County Conservation Districts, Suicide Prevention Networks, the Department of Veteran's Affairs, and other ag businesses.

In addition to what we see in the media, research has demonstrated that farm stress is on the minds of the agricultural community. I was involved in a 2022 survey of Pennsylvania livestock producers and supporting industry professionals. Of those who responded to the survey, 89% of farmers and 90% of ag industry professionals felt that mental health was moderately or very important. Mental health was indicated as a serious issue in the farming community by 72% of ag industry professionals who responded.

Now, I will provide an overview of our key programs and resources.

Podcasts: Farmers can have demanding schedules and long hours, so one medium we have been using to reach farmers on their terms is a podcast. This format affords anonymity and convenience because it can be downloaded and played in the milking parlor or tractor cab. The *Farm Stress Real Talk* podcast, launched in May 2023, aims to provide practical information in digestible 15- to 20-minute segments. We have released 30 episodes featuring guests from Penn State and outside organizations to increase awareness of tools and share professional advice that farmers utilize to manage in trying times. The podcast team has tackled family dynamics surrounding farm succession, farm safety, the weather and climate-related stress, and ambiguous loss. Over 1000 downloads represent six continents and 42 states, in addition to Pennsylvania, to which approximately one-third of the downloads are attributed. The podcast was recognized as a resource by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health and featured in several popular agricultural press publications.

Workshops and Webinars: Another program specifically targeting farmers is Mending the Stress Fence. This 30-minute program is offered as a webinar or in person for farm groups. In the program, we explore the dimensions of wellness, pose open-ended questions to foster discussion, and provide resources for suicide prevention. Over the past year, we have observed an uptick in interest in this program for field and forage crop producers as these producers are feeling added pressure from export market uncertainty, high input

costs, and fluctuations in commodity prices. Educators have been invited to present this stress management talk during crops days, no-till field days, agronomic professional development conferences, conservation district trainings, to new and beginning farmer groups, and other events. Educators have reported that, as they attend these events, farmers approach them one-on-one after the presentation to talk or request additional information.

Following a presentation at a Crop and Planting Clinic in a Northern Tier County, the educator who presented received this email message from the organizer, “Your presentation really seemed to resonate with many of the farmers in the room. Maybe this was due to the recent flooding that occurred back in August, but either way, it was well-received. I think all but maybe one of the folks in attendance were unaware of the AgriStress Helpline and National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. I was surprised by this, and also by the number of people who provided positive feedback about your presentation and the topic in general.” Another observation from informal audience polls at these meetings is the low number of attendees who are familiar with the 988 number. The farm stress team responded by creating a slide to be shared during presentations by educators across Extension teams. The slide lists several helplines, including the 988 and AgriStress helplines, along with the number for the Plain Sect helpline. An educator shared that following a presentation, she was approached by a Plain Sect farmer who shared with her about his son’s mental health struggles.

Another effort that I am hopeful is familiar to many of you is the Farm Stress Wallet Card. (Copies will be available for distribution.) We have distributed thousands of these cards through various ag events. In distributing these cards, I remind the audience to take one and put it in their wallets or put the numbers in their phones. Calls to these helplines can be made on behalf of others if they are in a situation and aren’t sure how to help a distressed person; the trained staff on the line can provide assistance. The notion of being better prepared to help your friends or neighbors seems to resonate with the farm community.

QPR stands for Question, Persuade, Refer. It is a nationally recognized suicide prevention program based on the principles of asking questions as to whether someone is having thoughts of suicide, persuading them to seek help, and referring them to someone appropriate to provide help. Penn State Extension has developed a suicide prevention curriculum for the agricultural sector. The 90-minute program covers key points on how and why stress manifests in farmers, as well as a useful role-playing scenario that allows participants to practice the concepts covered during instruction. The curriculum was submitted and is currently pending approval from the QPR Institute. For those who seek more in-depth training on suicide prevention, several farm stress team members also teach the 8-hour workshop, Mental Health First Aid.

While QPR for the agriculture program and Mental Health First Aid are suitable for anyone who feels a need to build their skill set surrounding suicide prevention, we recognize that

there is a continued need to equip professionals who serve the agricultural community and interact with farmers on a daily basis. Communicating with Farmers Under Stress is a two-hour program, delivered in-person or online, that provides guidance for those who support the agricultural industry to better equip themselves when they encounter farmers facing challenges. We cover the causes of stress for farmers, signs and symptoms of stress, active listening skills, and resources for help. The workshop has been offered at least 23 times by trained Extension educators to over 850 registrants representing 43 states and several countries, including Australia and Canada. Chip Flory, the host of AgriTalk radio, picked up on the course and featured it on his national ag program. Extension has collaborated with Horizon Farm Credit, the Pennsylvania Centers for Ag Excellence, and the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey to reach our target audience. I would like to mention that the Conservation Districts have been extremely receptive to this training for their staff, as they have expressed concerns about the added stress some farmers experience when implementing conservation programs.

While I am encouraged by the continued interest in farm stress from Extension educators, faculty, and staff, our team has recognized a need for professional development to enhance our skill set and preparedness. Many Extension employees are public-facing and interact with farmers and the agricultural industry, so we wanted to provide professional development to bolster their confidence and also to equip ag industry leaders to recognize and respond to stress more effectively. The resulting webinar series was launched in 2022 and has covered twelve topics such as delivering difficult news with empathy, life after suicide, active listening skills, adolescent mental health, and the tensions of farm succession. These webinars are free and open to the public.

In March 2025, the Pennsylvania AgForum: Taking Action Together for Our Agricultural Community brought together stakeholders from across sectors who have an interest in addressing farm stress. The goals of the forum included building partnerships and implementing short-term collaborative projects identified through the Strategic Doing process. Over 50 stakeholders representing agriculture, healthcare, finance, mental health, childcare, academia, and government officials participated in the event.

In addition to the networking opportunities, some outputs from the forum included an article on health insurance options for farmers, a webinar series on land use issues, a public service announcement on farm stress that was broadcast by some Harrisburg area radio stations, and a grant-funded discussion group for farmers that features invited speakers and led to plans for a regional farm safety day. Additionally, a follow-up survey after the forum indicated that 94% of respondents (n=15) listed specific actions they had taken as a result of attending, including fostering interactions with farm families, taking steps to realign their plan of work with mental health, and examining their organization's policies, procedures, or programs. Obtaining resources from the forum specifically pertaining to farm stress was reported by 79% (n=14). This forum was made possible through grant funding from the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (also referred to as "FRSAN").

Given the encouraging results from the previous effort, another AgForum is planned for March 10, 2026, in Lancaster. Our team is excited to see what collaborations and projects result from this effort.

Additional information about the programs I referenced, as well as relevant articles on farm stress and mental and financial well-being for farmers, is available on the Penn State Extension website at <https://extension.psu.edu>.

I want to express my gratitude for a hearing focused on farmers' mental health. As we work with farmers daily in Extension, we frequently hear their concerns expressed about low commodity prices, high input costs, the lack of reliable labor, concern about future generations taking over the farm, managing and supporting multiple generations on the farm, and much more followed by the feelings of helplessness that frequently seem to be part of the conversation. With that said, and similarly to our farmers, much of the work that we have been doing has been on a shoestring as safety and health programs, including farm stress, are not typically able to generate revenue to cover costs and can be harder to get farmers to attend when compared to a production-oriented workshop or field day.

The Penn State Extension Farm Stress team plans to continue building partnerships and collaborative networks to increase awareness of resources related to mental health for the agricultural community. Our team will meet next week to plan future programs by examining gaps in coverage and expertise, assessing stakeholder needs, and identifying emerging issues. We appreciate your continued support of these programs and focusing on attention on the health and wellbeing of the agricultural community.