

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present on this important topic. Good morning, my name is Lisa Wherry, and I am President of the Washington County Farm Bureau in Pennsylvania. Which is roughly over 500 of our members and also community members. I am truly honored to talk about how important Mental Health is to the farming community. It is near and dear to my heart because I personally have suffered from extreme stress that the farm can put on you.

I first started talking about Mental Health in 2018, because I learned from my own experience that so many farmers do not want to accept that it is okay not to be okay—and that's not okay. Being a part of the Farm Bureau network, including American Farm Bureau and Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, has given me a number of opportunities to find support for myself and my farm, and in return I'm able to contribute ideas to the broader efforts I'll talk about today, which are helping farmers and farm families around the country.

History of the Farm State of Mind Initiative

The American Farm Bureau Federation began working to address farmer mental well-being in 2017, when we partnered with the National Farmers Union to facilitate a dialogue about mental health and deploy solutions across farm country.

That partnership became the Farm State of Mind initiative. Eight years later, it is going strong and remains a key priority for our organization.

In 2026, we are entering a new chapter through creation of the Farm State of Mind Alliance.

The Farm State of Mind Alliance represents a joining of forces with the Farm Family Wellness Alliance, which was initiated by Farm Foundation and National 4-H Council in 2020. It will expand the reach of our collective messaging and resources to a broader coalition of food and farming sector partners, allowing for an even greater impact in rural communities.

What Farm State of Mind Offers

Since inception, the Farm State of Mind initiative's goals have been two-fold: to build awareness to reduce stigma, and to provide access to information and resources that promote farmer and rancher mental health wellness.

Over time, through the Farm State of Mind initiative we have carried out numerous campaigns to get people—including farmers—talking about mental health to help anyone who is struggling understand they are not alone, and to reduce the stigma that too often is a barrier to seeking help before it's too late.

This effort pervades all levels of Farm Bureau. Very importantly, our grassroots members have mobilized to make sure these messages are reaching into our farming communities. State and county Farm Bureaus, including Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, are actively engaged in outreach, communication and local events. For example, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau Women's Leadership Committee has been talking about mental well-being and featuring this as an agenda topic at their Farm Bureau Days. I have also traveled all around the state to the various counties, not just Washington County, handing stress balls and candy bars. Chocolate always relieves, and people tend to open up once you've fed them first.

Further driving the conversation, we have been able to conduct research to better understand the dynamics of rural stress, farmer and rural perceptions of mental health, and substance misuse among rural adults.

Importantly, Farm State of Mind makes available no-cost, online counseling and consultation services on the Togetherall platform, which is free to farmers and their family members over the age of 16.

This no-cost access is in addition to a national directory of state-by-state hotlines, which we put together in partnership with the University of Georgia, to make it easier for people to find help they need.

Finally, in partnership with Farm Credit and Michigan State University, we have deployed on-demand training for individuals who interact with farmers and ranchers, providing them with the skills to understand the sources of stress, identify effective communication strategies, reduce stigma related to mental health, and learn the warning signs of stress and suicide.

More information about all of this work and more, including tools to help someone in need, can be found at FarmStateOfMind.org.

An Ongoing Need

Having the leaders of the nation's two largest farmer professional organizations call attention to this issue in 2017, and commit their resources towards solutions, I believe was an important moment in elevating the conversation around rural mental health that we are still having today.

I also believe we have made strides in changing the conversation and encouraging farmers to reach out for help when they need it.

Sadly, as we in this room know, and as evidenced by the fact that this hearing is taking place, the need for this kind of effort remains.

Multiple studies show that farmer suicide rates are 2-5x higher than the national average. However, people are more than statistics.

It's safe to say that most people involved in agriculture know at least one person who has struggled with mental health.

And when one member of a family struggles with mental health, the whole family is deeply affected.

While it's true that mental health challenges aren't unique to the young or old, rural or urban, farming is a stressful occupation that is associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression.

Experiences such as natural disasters, extreme weather events, financial uncertainty, fluctuating markets, and other factors all contribute to extreme stress for farmers and ranchers who often live in a very isolated setting.

What the Farm State of Mind initiative uniquely brings to the table, from my perspective, is that it was created by farmer organizations who have deep insights into the needs, lifestyles, and concerns of farm families.

Just this past weekend, American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall used the stage at our annual National Convention to share a deeply moving and personal account of his own struggle with mental health after losing his first wife to illness. His story, and his willingness to so openly share it, is a powerful demonstration to our members that it's important to seek help, and that the farming community has their back.

Two of our members, Steve Breeding of Delaware and Marshal Sewell of Florida, have bravely also shared video testimonies of how mental health has impacted them and their families. We have been able to get these stories in front of a wider audience through social media and an Ad Council partnership.

Farmers and America's rural communities look out for one another, and to me that's what our Alliance and the Farm State of Mind initiative are all about – America's farm organizations coming together and showing up for America's farmers in a potentially life-changing way.

Closing

I appreciate the committee inviting me to present on this panel, and for drawing attention to farmer mental health during the Pennsylvania Farm Show. To build a sustainable future for agriculture for our nation and our world, we must promote the wellbeing of our nation's farmers and ranchers.

I hope that in addition to the policy discussion we will have, Pennsylvania's farmers will receive the message that it is okay not to be ok, and that you are not alone if you are struggling.

I also encourage anyone who feels they need support or knows someone they suspect is struggling from farm stress, to visit FarmStateOfMind.org and make use of our resources. The services available are private and anonymous, and they have helped many farm families already.