



GROWING HOPE FOR AMERICA
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The Movement: How Farm Aid Nurtures Good Food From the Ground Up

“We started out to save the family farmer. Now it looks like the family farmer is going to save us.”
— Willie Nelson

The Beginning

During the mid-1980s, America’s farmers found themselves in the fight for their lives. Low prices for farm products, plummeting land values, rising interest rates and skyrocketing production costs overloaded farmers with crushing debts that forced tens of thousands of family farmers off their land. Farmers lost their land, their livelihoods and their hope was fading fast.

In 1985, Willie Nelson heard Bob Dylan’s remarks from the Live Aid stage that something should be done for our own farmers right here in America and he agreed. In several weeks time, joined by Neil Young and John Mellencamp, Nelson produced a special concert, bringing together over 50 artists before 78,000 fans in Champaign, IL, to raise funds and to make people aware that American farm families were struggling to make a living on the land. Farm Aid was born. The concert raised over \$9 million and drew enormous attention to the devastating economic problems faced by this country’s family farmers and their communities.

Supporting Farmers’ Fight for Survival

Still reeling from the economic woes of the 1980s, family farms were suddenly confronting a new threat: factory farms. Factory farms, closely connected to large powerful corporations, needed large amounts of cheap grains to feed their livestock—and Congress obliged. Successive farm policies removed price supports to farmers and drove down commodity prices, further exacerbating farmers’ debt. Replacing price supports with taxpayer subsidies produced cheap subsidized grain, fueling the growth of factory farms. As factory farms grew in size and numbers, so did their threat to family farms.

Farm Aid saw the rise of factory farms not only as an assault against family farmers, but a serious threat to all Americans who valued healthy food and a clean environment. Through its relationships with farm organizations across the country, Farm Aid began to fund efforts to stop the expansion of factory farms. Farm Aid worked with farm organizations from a number of states to form the Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment (CFFE)—a grassroots initiative to unite family farmers and rural communities against the powerful factory farms.

“The consumer and the family farmer have to work together. If there is hope for the family farmers in America, then there is hope for America.” — John Mellencamp

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In April 1995, Farm Aid president Willie Nelson joined the farmers of CFFE at a protest in Lincoln Township, Missouri. The event became a rallying cry of farmers and consumers across the country, fed up with corporate abuses that pushed family farmers off their land, polluted the environment and jeopardized food safety. Family farm groups built strong coalitions with environmentalists, animal welfare groups and consumer organizations to mount effective organizing campaigns against factory farms. In many communities, farmers and residents successfully blocked construction of new factory farms.

Growing the Good Food Movement

Since its beginnings, Farm Aid has consistently taken its message of promoting good food from family farmers directly to the American people. Today, Americans understand that the industrial system of agriculture is destroying the environment and producing foods of questionable quality that pose major threats to public health.

American agriculture is at an historic turning point, thanks to the growing number of people whose lives have been enhanced by the delicious experience of eating food from family farms that is fresh and good for their bodies, the environment, and their communities. More Americans are reaching for locally produced, humanely raised, family farm-identified and organic food. Farm Aid sees this Good Food Movement as farmers’ best opportunity to stay on their land, growing good food for everyone.

Farm Aid has expanded its Farmer Resource Network to support farmers who want to transition to more sustainable and organic growing methods by funding groups providing hands-on training to farmers in these methods, and mentoring projects for new and young farmers. Farm Aid is helping farmers learn from each other by sponsoring field days where farmers tour other farms. It is supporting research into better sustainable growing methods and providing muscle to the fight for good organic standards. It is working with farmers interested in on-farm renewable energy projects. Farm Aid also backs efforts to channel more federal dollars into organic and sustainable production research. Everything Farm Aid is doing is aimed at helping family farmers grow and become more successful.

“As long as someone has his hands in the dirt to measure the health of it, I feel like everything else will be okay. As long as there is good food coming to my table from a caring farmer, then I think everything else will be okay.” — Dave Matthews

“You know, we’re not big, we know we’re small. We’re David and Goliath, there’s an army of Goliath against us, because of the money and the corporate structure that we’re taking on...But we’re still here, every year we come back. Farm Aid is a real thing, about protecting something that is sacred in this country.” — Neil Young

Ultimately, Farm Aid’s work is all about connecting people who want good food to the family farmers committed to growing it. In the past twenty-five years, Farm Aid has helped grow the Good Food Movement. More and more people want to know where their food comes from, how it’s grown and who grows it. The success of this movement is why there’s a vegetable garden on the White House lawn, a national conversation about what our kids eat, and increasing political will to broaden access to fresh, healthy food and investigate the stranglehold that corporations have on our food system.

As farming once again becomes a viable career choice, more young people are becoming farmers, replenishing our country with new ideas and innovations, growing local and regional economies, contributing to our national economy recovery, taking care of our natural resources and ensuring good food from family farms for everyone. This is Farm Aid’s hope and vision for a new American agriculture.