



FARM AID 2016 at USDA

Thursday, September 15th

11:30 am – 1:30 pm

Jefferson Auditorium
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC

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To understand Farm Aid and why we made this film, I'd like to invite you to consider the character of our President Willie Nelson. It is in Willie's DNA to travel through the world with an open ear – to listen and observe, and to take in every person he meets. Willie meets people with deep respect, and through Farm Aid, gives farmers a place to bring forward their unique voices and perspectives.

In the midst of the 1980s farm crisis, he understood that farmers who were at the brink were most often not being heard or seen in America. He saw that their essential role in growing our food, stewarding our land and in fortifying the structure of rural communities was being forgotten and discarded. This is why he started Farm Aid.

This is a Farm Aid story. ***Homeplace Under Fire*** tells the story of farm advocates – the ordinary people from humble corners of our country who stood up and did extraordinary things when their world was falling apart. They refused to see their way of life go up in flames. They stood by farmers in their darkest hour, and helped them navigate a daunting financial and legal landscape. In short, they worked night and day to help family farmers stay on their land and to thrive.

Their work continues to this day. For over 30 years, farm advocates have been the listening ear on the other end of the phone – the go-to person who can offer reliable and authentic resources for farmers. These are the people we refer farmers to who call our Farm Aid hotline.

Their work is not glamorous. Their work is not easily understood and it is too often underappreciated. Their work is arduous, tiring, and “in the weeds.” The swath of regulations they have mastered is impressive. They have founded organizations, started hotlines and support networks; helped secure landmark policies; won unprecedented legal battles; and they have literally saved lives. The farms they have saved from going out of business count in the thousands. But above all, I believe their greatest accomplishment lies in their compassion. Crisis has a tendency to push people in one of two directions: stuck in anger and resentment...or toward love. With every ounce of my being, I believe that farm advocates, by helping people make sense of hard times and by standing at their side in moments of great adversity – were instrumental in rooting this farm movement deeply in a true humanity. They were – and are – central to all of us in moving forward together.

At a time when our country can feel so divided, I know that their work is as urgent as ever. Summer time is usually quieter on the 1-800-FARM-AID hotline. But this summer we have seen a 106% spike in the hotline calls we receive compared to last year. These are early indications of financial stress among our farmers, and a sign that we need so many more people at the ready to do what farm advocates do, and we need the adequate resources to make sure they can do it well. While we stand here to celebrate all that this community and this Administration has accomplished, I am reminded that our work is not yet done.

On behalf of Farm Aid – and our President Willie Nelson – I invite you to see ***Homeplace Under Fire*** and consider how it sits within the shared work of every single person in this room – the work of serving and supporting America’s farmers and ranchers.

As a final note, I want to extend my gratitude to the USDA for opening their doors to us for this event, and to be willing to engage in a dialogue that is not always easy. In particular, I want to thank Sara Eckhouse in the Secretary’s office and Matt Herrick, the USDA’s Communications Director, for their hard work in making this day possible.

Thank you.