*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Go big or go home? Farms face survival of the fewer, and bigger**

There was a popular T-shirt worn by powerlifters at tournaments when my son participated in the sport in high school.

“Go big or go home,” was the motto proudly displayed by the young men and women whose successes were measured by the amount of weight they could manage in three different lifts.

It also fits a culture where we embrace that bigger is better. Bigger vehicles, bigger homes and bigger TVs are a tribute to our obsession that size does matter.

Apparently that’s the opinion of U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, who visited the 2019 World Dairy Expo last month in Madison. He told farmers he doesn’t think there’s room in the dairy industry for smaller farms.

“What we see, obviously, is economy of scale having happened in America,” he said. “The big get bigger and the small will go out, and that is what we’ve seen here. It is very difficult with economy of scale and capital needs, and all of the environmental regulations and everything else today, to survive milking 40, 50, 60 or even 100 cows. And that’s what we’ve seen. What we’ve seen is the number of farmers go out but the (numbers of) dairy cows haven’t reduced that much.”

Many viewed Perdue’s remarks as a punch in the gut to producers already on the ground. Let’s use the setting of the largest event in the world that celebrates dairy to throw salt on an open wound.

Clearly the survival of dairy farms is in crisis. Wisconsin has lost more than 1,600 dairy farms in the past three years; the nation lost 3,000 this past year. Farms cannot survive losing money when domestic dairy consumption is declining and international trade wars are limiting the ability to export.

When smaller farms close, the cows are shifted to larger operations. The production doesn’t go away; it merely moves to another farm, which Perdue noted in his remarks. At the same time, he said he doesn’t support supply-side management, saying it’s up to farmers.

Are we better off with more mega-dairies and fewer smaller farms? Not according to Wisconsin Farmers Union president and third-generation dairy farmer Darin Von Ruden, who runs a 50-cow organic dairy near Westby.

“The mindset that has been pushed on farmers to continually grow is ultimately pushing them out of business as overproduction forces market prices down,” Von Ruden said.

It’s not simply moving milk production to larger farms. It’s also measuring the impact on local economies when smaller farms go out of business.

“The impact of the loss of farms and that revenue in our rural areas is reaching our Main Streets, where we’re losing banks, post offices and even grocery stores,” Von Ruden said. “This farm crisis will leave a lasting impact on far more than the farmers who become a part of growing farm-loss statistics each year.”

Perhaps Perdue is correct. Perhaps the future of dairy is large conglomerates controlled by foreign investors with a deep pocketbook and with an appetite for losing money now on the promise they will control more of the market and the profits later. Trade wars will end and someone will create a way to provide product to a growing global population. Maybe Perdue was simply telling it like it is, a trait that many seem to admire with our politicians and bureaucrats these days.

I confess I bristled when I heard his remarks. I wondered if Perdue had ever been on the receiving end of a manure-filled tail in the eye as he squatted alongside a cow.

According to his White House biography, he has — or least he grew up on a farm.

“As a youngster growing up on a dairy and diversified row-crop farm in rural Georgia, Perdue never fully realized that the blessings of purposeful meaningful work would serve him as well as they have in life. When he was a young boy feeding the calves and plowing the fields, he was an integral part of the workforce on his father’s farm. But more than anything in his life, it was the family farm that shaped Sonny Perdue. He has lived and breathed the exhilaration of a great crop, and the despair and devastation of a drought. He learned by experience what his father told him as a child, ‘If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you.’”

Perdue also told farmers at World Dairy Expo that there is hope.

“Farmers are pretty good at managing and managing through tough times,” he said. “I think those who have survived through the 2014 Farm Bill should do well in the 2018 farm bill.”

Survival — of the fewer and the bigger.

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