

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Farm suicide rates are zooming

Bush and Yeutter talk of "healthy competition" and "free trade," while the rural suicide rate soars.

During the mid-1980s, a wave of farm bankruptcies, foreclosures, and farm finance crises hit the U.S. agriculture sector. There was a sad exodus from family farming, and the total amount of farm debt of the nation contracted by several millions of dollars. As of 1990, the official line from Washington, D.C. has been that the crisis is long passed, and we are now in good shape.

This is a grim joke, considering, for example, that today's wheat prices are at record lows, and a new wave of financial crises threatens to overtake thousands of remaining farm families. Apart from livestock, most prices are low relative to the bare-minimum income needed for survival of family farms.

However, the most graphic description of the true state of farming comes from statistics other than crop prices and ledger sheets. Farm-state health departments are reporting record rates of suicides.

The same process is taking place throughout the nations where the Bush-Thatcher program for "competition," "free trade," and "low cost farming" has been dominant—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

The October *Farm Journal*, one of the largest farm-circulation magazines in the United States, ran an article entitled, "The 80s are over, but . . . farmers are still killing themselves." The *Farm Journal* ran a list of 22 phone hotline numbers available in farm regions for farmers to call if they are in distress. The magazine also ran an extensive description of the "suicide signals to watch for," so that

family members would be alerted in advance to seek out help for persons who are a danger to themselves.

Recently, the Minnesota Center for Health Statistics updated their studies of the rates of suicide they analyzed in 1985, and those today, among farmers in Minnesota, Montana, the Dakotas, and Wisconsin. Paul Gunderson, the center's director, observed, "In each state, the suicide rates were more elevated than I would have expected them to be. We hadn't gathered suicide data since 1985 and were under the impression that conditions had improved."

Minnesota had the highest suicide rate of the five states—65 per 100,000 farmers. Wisconsin had the next highest with 59 per 100,000. These rates compare with the national average of 10-11 per 100,000.

The situation is the same in other farm states. The Oklahoma Department of Health reviewed death certificates issued in the state between 1983 and 1988, and found that suicides killed five times more farmers during that time period than fatal accidents on the farm. Farmers in Oklahoma account for 2.16% of the total population, but they account for 6.12% of the suicides. The farm suicide rate is 42 per 100,000, compared with about 15 per 100,000 in the state's general population.

If anything, these statistics understate the truth, because farmers are known for staging equipment accidents so that their families can collect life insurance.

The Oklahoma phone hotline "Ag-Link" reports that suicide intervention cases totaled 115 last year,

and this year the number is expected to rise as high as 175.

There is no complicated analyses needed of the causes behind this crisis. Millions in rural areas feel unable to cope with a situation where they are financially ruined, and yet the Bush government leaders speak of "recovery."

A governors' task force held 13 town meetings in Oklahoma to review the high suicide rate, and person after person testified about the impossibility of paying debt and getting help. Gov. Henry Bellmon called for a federal investigation of the conduct of the Farmers Home Administration, the federal lender of last resort run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has called thousands of farm loans.

Health officials in Australia are reporting the same rising suicide rates. Researchers at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney have studied how youths in rural areas are particularly affected. They suffer a higher rate of suicide than their counterparts in cities.

A study of rural New South Wales (NSW) showed that there has been an upsurge in male youths suicides, and that the downturn in the rural farm economy is the major cause.

A researcher on the project, Prof. Brent Waters, said that there are many factors, especially the farm crisis. "It is a combination of factors which include the downturn of the economy, youth unemployment in the bush, and a loss of self-esteem."

The study, entitled "Youth Suicide in NSW: Urban-Rural Trends 1964-88," showed that suicides by young men have increased 570% in 25 years, compared to a doubling in the state overall. In the rural shires of New South Wales, the suicide rate increased from 3.5 per 100,000 in the late 1960s, to more than 20 per 100,000 in the late 1980s.