

FALL FARM & Harvest

Herald photos by Logan Everson.



A Special Section Insert for
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MONROE COUNTY
HERALD

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Sentry-Enterprise**

Cashton Record

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Special Section | 12 pages



In the Spotlight: Wegner Family Farms

By **BENNY MAILMAN**
Herald Editor

On Tuesday, October 17th, a heavy fog held the dawn's direct sunlight at bay throughout most of Monroe County. At Wegner Family Farms, located at 7769 Garnett Avenue, just off HWY 27, North of Sparta, Mike Wegner and his crew of three waited for the dense fog to lift, so that they could start on their harvesting goals for the day. The Wegner family has been in business since 1967, when Dean Wegner, Mike's father, bought his first of three farms. On October 9th, of this year, Dean passed away, having initiated and contributed to the strong legacy of Wegner Family Farms that his son, Mike, now continues on with.

IN THE BEGINNING

Dean Wegner bought the property on Garnett Avenue back in 1967. The family moved onto the property in 1970. Dean had grown up just a mile down the road. "We milked cows here, for almost 40 years, up until about 2008," Mike Wegner told the Herald. "We started out with 10 and finished up with 60. We started out with a few registered Jerseys and I took them to the fair, with 4-H. I was in the West Beaver Creek club."

The original acreage for Wegner Family Farms started out at 100 acres and has grown to 2,500 acres. Within a 30-year period, the Wegner's acquired two additional farms, along with some

supplementary land. "We bought this farm next to us in 1981, and in 2008 we bought the next farm," Mike told the Herald. "Statistically, farms only come up for sale once every 56 years. We were fortunate to buy the second farm on its second time of being up for sale. That never happens [going up for sale twice]."

HARVESTING

Mike Wegner spoke of custom harvesting. "Custom Harvesting is when you go out and combine for other people," Mike explained. "They [other farmers] hire you out to harvest their crops for them. Some people are cow people, and some are crop and machinery people; you just do what you are good at. Dad [Dean Wegner] was doing custom work back in 1960, before I was even born."

Dean Wegner's parents had cows on their farm, but they did not venture out much past that type of farming. "This was something my dad did all on his own," Mike stated. "In farming, like any business, you always need growth, just to sustain yourself. My dad and I always agreed on that aspect of the business, and we took any growth opportunities that came our way."



This grain truck can store a full semi-load of corn. Mike Wegner says that with the size of their machinery there is not much cause for alarm on tipping over, even on the steep hills he and his crew find themselves harvesting on. Herald photo by Benny Mailman.

Speaking further on the growth of their business, Mike said, "We rent a lot of land also, for our cropping operation, that's just the way it is. It is all about the volume." Mike spoke to the reality of cost and how nothing is going to get cheaper, whether it is the land, fuel prices, or even the machinery. "You cannot get stagnant in farming. You must always be aware of the future, utilizing technology when it is there."

Mike also spoke to not taking on more than your crew can handle. "We used to do 4,000 acres, back when dad was young. He would do most of the custom work and I would handle our crops. You just have to know your limits and what you can logically accomplish"

On his father's passing, Mike said that Dean was out driving his Gator around right up until the day he passed. "We

would always laugh and complain about him always checking in on us, giving us advice and direction all the time, but we are all going to miss that, you know."

THE CREW

Mike Wegner's crew consists of three other men, Nick Wolf, Steve Nichols, and Barry Schroeder. "We are all really good friends," Mike stated. "Everyone in the crew works very hard and we get the work done, but at the end of the day, we are still laughing. With a crew like this, it makes every day more enjoyable than it might otherwise be. It is stressful and a lot of hard work, but at the end of the day there is the satisfaction that we reached and completed our goals for that day."

WEGNER

cont. on page 7

There are 2,500 acres of land for the Wegner Family Farms to harvest that is theirs, as well as some land that they rent. It is all about volume and maximizing your yield per-acre, Mike Wegner told the Herald. Herald photo by Benny Mailman.



Getting through the dry crop season

Lack of summer rainfall keeps expectations low

By **KYLE EVANS**
Staff Writer

From May 15 through September 15, the local area was approximately 15-18 inches short of rain, causing crops to not yield as much as maybe they did last year. But with good soil moisture in the Spring and crops progressing earlier in the Fall, seems to be a sufficient recipe for sustainability.

Bradley Robson, Monroe County Conservation Agronomist said, "For the most part, farmers are satisfied. It obviously is not a record year of crops by any means, with the drought and the

growing season not the most ideal but it ended up being sustainable for local farmers." All things considered, "the yields aren't disappointing. We were Lucky we were sitting where we were in the Spring with soil moisture," said Robson.

"It was good to have rain last week to ensure the soil moisture for the harvest. I didn't hear many people complaining about it," he said.

PRICES

Robson mentioned, "corn prices are challenging, if you didn't have your corn contracted or locked in, the spot market right now is either break even or a little more in some cases."

The crop prices are mostly determined from the Chicago board of trade. But one thing locally that can be an advantage sometimes is the basis price. Corn has a per bushel price and a basis price, the basis price is basically a transportation cost.

Here in Monroe County, we're only about thirty miles from the Mississippi river which can be an advantage and some mills will work with sellers on the basis price. Cargill, in La Crosse is one of the main shipping points locally.

The water level of the Mississippi can make a difference as well, if the water level is too high or too low, they might only be able to load 2/3 full barges instead of full barges. This year, the water level is lower. Places like Cargill will ship out as much as they can down the river before freezing up. But if they can't ship out full

barges, they may not have the room for as much grain.

There are only so many trips a barge can make; they usually bring fertilizer up the river and go back down with grain.

Local mills like Sparta Co-op, Melrose Farm Service, and Allied co-op buy and resell grain but a lot of grain still goes back to feeding animals in the area. "If I'm raising corn and have cattle a farmer could store it at a co-op and use it for their feed mixes," said Robson.

DRY cont. on page 11

A combine chops up a cornfield in rural Sparta on an October evening. Herald photo by Logan Everson.



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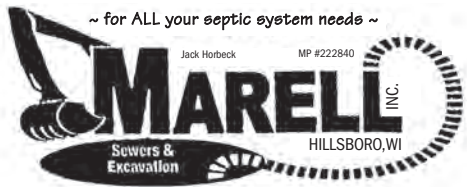
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'EDUCATION' continued from page 3

Wisconsin agricultural products is available through the Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin program. The "Something Special from Wisconsin" label, provided by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), is aimed at promoting products made with ingredients sourced from within the state.

The report also touches on the impacts of the Dairy Innovation Hub, an initiative geared at bolstering agricultural research and development across multiple UW campuses. According to the report, more than 130 projects have already been funded through the initiative, from products focused on monitoring and improving cattle health to advance automation in milking processes to reducing farm waste.

Like most industries, the agricultural industry is struggling to find workers to fill open positions. In order to address this, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has been working to ensure that Wisconsin students in grades five through twelve can take at least one agricultural course. Membership drives by ag-focused organizations such as the FFA are also helping to expose Wisconsin youth to agriculture.

Wisconsin's apprenticeship program was also highlighted, with eleven career pathways in agriculture, food, and natural resources available for students to explore. These apprenticeships give students on-the-job training, bolstering their employability in the future. In the 2022-2023 school year, participation in the agricultural pathways of the apprenticeship program increased by more than 250% over the past decade, with 1,045 students participating in the 2022-2023 school year.

Moving forward, the DWD plans to build on the growing number of organic farms in Wisconsin. The department has recently initiated a Registered Apprenticeship program for Organic Vegetable Farm Managers. Since beginning in 2019, more than two dozen have enrolled.

Efforts to modernize apprenticeship opportunities and keep up with evolving technologies has resulted in fourteen new occupational pathways available to high school juniors and seniors in the past year. This includes Dairy Grazier and Arborist—the first youth arborist apprenticeship program not just in Wisconsin, but in the country. Another new program is the Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (AFNR) pathway, which focuses on careers in planning, implementing, producing, managing, and processing agricultural goods and services.

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'WEGNER' continued from page 2

WEATHER

Mike Wegner informed the Herald that indeed, weather is constantly on the mind of farmers. "You're always fighting the weather; it is all you are thinking about. You get up and immediately think, 'What's the weather like, what's the weather like?' Like this morning, it's foggy, so we won't be able to start beans [soybeans] until noon. No matter what we do here, it always comes down to the weather."

When the Herald pressed Mike on the how the drought affected their yield this year, the Herald was quite surprised at the answer. "We were pretty shocked when we got in the fields this year, at how good our crops are." Mike started out. "Soybeans need a lot of water and there was none in August, yet our soybeans are very healthy. As well, the corn is spectacular." Mike went on to explain the most important times for corn to get rain. "Corn does not need a lot of rain. It needs rain to come out of the ground and it needs rain to pollinate. We get better yields with a little less rain than with too much rain."

STEEP HILLS AND GRADES

One of the reasons harvesting may take longer than some folks think, is that there are steep grades that Mike and his crew must take time and utilize caution to traverse with their tractors and combines. "Our combines have a Hillco system in them, which is a self-leveling mechanism, where the combine stays level as you go. We have big tractors, so while we do maintain a level of caution, no one is going to tip over." Mike explained that when the weather is bad, and the hills get muddy or greasy, they use common sense and wait for it to dry.

The dense fog on Tuesday morning kept Mike Wegner and his three-man crew from starting straight in on their harvesting goals for the day. Mike's father, Dean Wegner, started out with 100 acres, back in 1967. The Wegner Family Farms now has 2,500 acres. Herald photo by Benny Mailman.

END OF HARVEST

Mike Wegner and his crew shoot for having the harvesting completed by Thanksgiving Day. When the harvesting is done, the farm equipment and vehicles need to be cleaned. "We like to wash all of our equipment before we put it away [for the winter]. We can spend five days just washing the two combines off — it is a lot of work because we like them spotless. We are big on keeping things cleaned up and maintained."

Mike spoke to the exhaustion that comes with the two months of harvesting. "After you are done harvesting, you don't feel like doing much for a while. You get kind of worn out from the 2 to 3-month process. In recent years, we head down to Florida for about a week, to relax and unwind. When we get back from Florida, for the rest of the winter, we work on snowmobiles, here in the shed, and any maintenance that our equipment may require." Mike says that he and the crew will start getting everything ready in March, for the planting season.

The Herald inquired about where all of the corn and soybeans go, after being harvested, and how do they get the best prices for their product. "I look at my phone every day. We have two markets here, the first being the ethanol plant in Necedah. We haul a lot of our corn there. I look at their cash bids every day. They will call us when they need corn and maybe offer us extra per bushel because they really need it."

The other place is Cargill, on the river, in La Crosse. This is where their soybeans are hauled to. "We sell our soybeans there and some corn. We see it all being loaded on barges and then steamed down to New Orleans. It is a cool feeling knowing that what we have harvested is going to feed the world. We have no idea where most of our production even ends up. Farmers feed the world."

"We would always laugh and complain about him always checking in on us, giving us advice and direction all the time, but we are all going to miss that, you know."

— Mike Wegner

A FAREWELL TO A GREAT MAN

A celebration of Life was held for Dean Wegner, on Thursday, October 12th. As a symbolic gesture of honor and respect for a man who was a steward of the land and whose passion for farming was ingrained in every fiber of his being, many attendees showed up on their farm equipment. The field across from Torkelson Page-Smith Funeral home was packed. Dean will be missed by many — his family, his buddies that he had breakfast and coffee with every day, at 6 a.m., at Dorine's Family Inn, and the land in which he was a gracious steward.

At the Life Celebration held for Dean Wegner, a strong gesture of honor was put for by his friends, when many brought their tractors and farm equipment to where he was being celebrated. Contributed photo.



Changes over time see changes in family farms

BY NICOLETTE NAUMAN
Sentry-Enterprise Editor

It's a common refrain in rural areas: the family farm is disappearing. And it isn't difficult to see why: Wisconsin has lost more than 8,700 farms between 2007 and 2012, and has lost an additional 4,900 farms between 2012 and 2022. Today, Wisconsin is home to just 64,100 farms—which is still a lot, all things considered. However, it pales in comparison to the 130,000 farms that operated in the 1930s—and

those were just dairy farms!

Rural communities have recorded notable declines from the 1990s to today, much of which has been colloquially attributed to the loss of local, family-owned farms. And yet, Wisconsin's agricultural industry has never been more productive.

Of the 64,100 farms operating in the state, just 6,000 or so are dairy farms. As a result, Wisconsin is home to more dairy farms than any other state. We are a leader in the dairy industry, contributing \$45.6

billion to the Wisconsin economy each year. We're number one in cheese production, with over 600 types, styles, and varieties produced here—nearly double what any other state produces, and 25% of the national cheese production.

So what gives? How are we simultaneously losing farms while increasing production? The instinctive reaction is to point to massive corporate farms—but what exactly defines a "corporate farm," and are they really so prevalent as we may think? How do we tell the difference between

a corporate farm and just a large farm owned by a family?

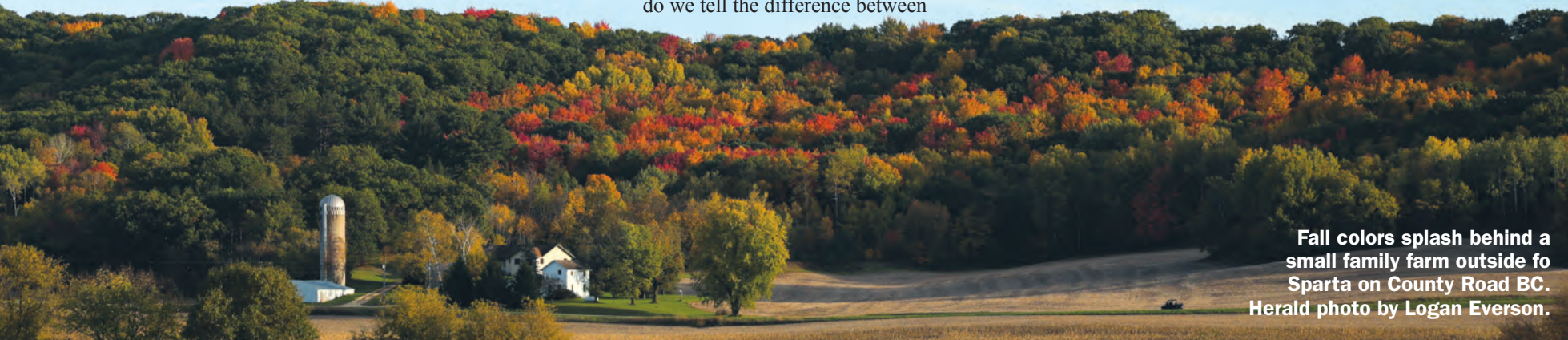
In their yearly report focused on U.S. farms and ranches, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture tends to avoid the use of the word "corporate" when typing farms. Instead, they opt for "family farms" versus "nonfamily farms." So what makes the difference?

According to the 2022 Edition of America's Farms and Ranches at a Glance, nonfamily farms are defined as "any farm where any

operator and any individuals related to them do not own a majority (50%) of the business." Fair enough—you can't really call it a family farm if the family in question doesn't own most if not all of the farm.

The report breaks family farms down into three broad categories: small family farms, with a gross cash farm income (GCFI) of less than \$350,000; midsize family farms, with a GCFI between \$350,000 and \$999,999; and

CHANGES cont. on page 9



Fall colors splash behind a small family farm outside of Sparta on County Road BC. Herald photo by Logan Everson.



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'CHANGES'
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large-scale family farms, with a GCFI of one million dollars or more.

Small family farms are further broken down: retirement farms, whose principal operators have retired from farming but continue to farm on a small scale; off-farm-occupation farms, or farms in which the principal operators report a primary occupation that is not farming; and farming-occupation farms, in which farming is the primary occupation of the primary operator.

That third category is divided further into low sales and moderate sales. Low-sale small family farms have a GCFI of less than \$150,000, while moderate sale small family farms have a GCFI between \$150,000 and \$349,999.

Large-scale farms, meanwhile, are broken down into subcategories: large farms, with a GCFI between \$1,000,000 and \$4,999,999; and very large farms, with a GCFI of \$5,000,000 or more.

In 2021, the total number of farms recorded as family farms—regardless of size—was 1,960,696 out of a total of 2,003,754 U.S. farms. Only 43,058 farms were recorded as nonfamily farms. Approximately 89% of all farms were small family farms, operating 45% of the total agricultural land. These small farms accounted for 18% of the total value of production. In other words: most U.S. farms are classified as small family farms.

So why does it feel like the family farm is fading away? If 89% of all farms are small family farms, and about 98% are classified as family farms, then why does the myth of the family farm's decline persist?

Well, it's most likely due to a change in what actually entails a "family farm." Back in the day, a family farm was exactly that: a family farm. As in, one family per farm. If you as a farmer had six kids survive to adulthood, those six would go off and start farms of their own. Or five would, with the sixth opting to take over the existing farm.

But times change. After the World Wars, particularly post-WWII, we began to see

the advent of suburbia. More people began to migrate to the cities, looking for work. Changes over the later half of the twentieth century saw a shift from farming as a means to feed your family to farming as a means to make a living.

The family farms didn't disappear—they consolidated. Instead of going out to build your own farm, you might instead stay on the farm you grew up on and build upon it. Families began to partner together, neighbors and communities might consolidate for greater profits, and so on.

Beyond that, shifts in the economy meant that, for an increasing number of farm kids, sticking with farming as a career just didn't seem like the viable choice. Farming is a heavy financial risk. Your profits and income are dependent on the weather, which can be unpredictable. A disease may infect your fields or your herds, resulting in lost money. Natural disasters, from floods to droughts, and manmade ones such as wars could drive up the cost of everything from the fuel necessary to power your equipment to the seeds you need to plant a field.

It's difficult to mitigate these risks, and for small family farms with limited capital to work with, a shift in the weather could be disastrous. Growing up and watching your family struggle to make ends meet could discourage a farm kid from pursuing farming. Instead, they might go on to pursue a more stable career, one with greater pay and less risk.

As a result, the family farms have had to change over time. Instead of dozens dotting the rural landscape, we now only have a handful. But they're larger than their ancestors, and thanks to innovations in agricultural technology, they're able to produce more with fewer farms operating.

The perceived loss of the family farm appears to be based less actual production and more in a change of culture, economics, and industrial technology. So, in truth, perhaps it's not as simple as blaming corporate farms for the loss of the family farm. Instead, perhaps we should look more to the changes in our world over the past century when wondering about the state of the family farm today.

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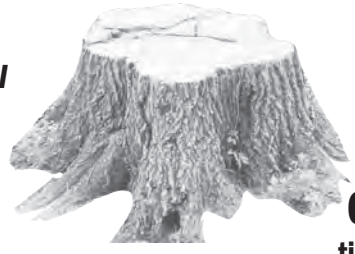
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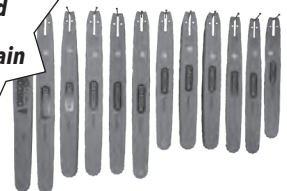
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'DRY' continued from page 4

Also locally, a vast amount of corn goes to the ethanol plant, in Necedah.

All in all, "the farmers who watched the market this summer, should be fairly profitable this year," said Robson.

NUTRIENTS & FERTILIZER

The supply chain issues seem to have been resolved for the most part compared to last year, "prices of nutrients have softened, and the supply is there," said Robson.

This year the challenge comes from the drought over the Summer. "The nutrients applied last fall and this spring with the reduced crop output leaves extra nutrients left in the soil," said Robson.

Many farmers will be looking to cut back on fertilizer this Fall as they likely didn't use as much nutrients with the smaller yields. Robson explained, "If you take a 25% cut on your yield, you'll probably cut back 10-20% on your fertilizer from last year."

Part of Robson's role as the County Agronomist is helping landowners come up with nutrient management plans. When nutrients are over or under applied, the soil can begin to erode, which can cause water issues with phosphorus getting into water and such.

"Having a nutrient-management plan is imperative to the long-term success of

anybody involved in crop farming," said Robson. He said, "If you're just using the same amount of fertilizer each year just to do that, it doesn't make sense as there may be nutrients leftover. And the cost of nutrients is expensive, so if we can all save money and have better soil, it's a win-win scenario." Healthier soils don't need as much fertility.

"A lot of cranberry marshes have nutrient management plans as well. There are many different soil types in Monroe County but, the better you do on nutrient management the healthier your soils are the better the crops can do on their own without as many applied nutrients plus the cost," said Robson. It doesn't matter if it's cranberries, beans, corn, hay, or whatever.

DAIRY

"The Dairy industry is still a struggle; the small guys have a hard time making it. Essentially, we're close to the same number or a little less of cows producing the same amounts of milk as there were years ago, just bigger farms instead of many small farms," said Robson.

The price of milk leaves the smaller farms in a tough position to make it.

For more questions, or help building your nutrient management plan you can call Robson at 608-696-8664 or stop into the Monroe County Land Conservation Department at 820 Industrial Dr., Ste. #3.

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