

# Farm Aid: Planting Seeds for a Prosperous Future (Premier Article)

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*By Marci Wise*

What do Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, Neil Young and Dave Matthews have in common? Besides being some of the most iconic figures in the music industry, they're also concerned citizens taking proactive measures to strengthen the U.S. economy at a grassroots level. Through Farm Aid, they are the voice of family farmers striving to preserve an American way of life – working the land and providing fresh and wholesome foods to the public.

In the midst of a dramatic economic downturn, the country's farmers have been hit especially hard; issues regarding the availability and accessibility of credit, farm foreclosures and the dairy crisis all demand immediate attention. Farm Aid believes that we can reverse our current plight by returning to a simpler, more autonomous way of life and revitalizing our most basic homegrown resource – the American institution of the family farm. History proves that America's greatest strength has always been a flair for self-sufficiency and innovation, and Farm Aid initiatives are on the frontlines of returning us to a more empowered position. Promoting family farms not only holds the promise of breathing new life into our floundering economy, but it also supports greater health, wellbeing and a cleaner environment for generations to come.

Willie Nelson, who organized the first Farm Aid concert in 1985, is quoted as saying: “We started out to save the family farmer. Now it looks like the family farmer is going to save us.”



Neil Young & Willie Nelson perform at the 25th Farm Aid, 2010 Milwaukee, Wisconsin

### **Awareness Is Key**

Over the years, Farm Aid has brought in millions of dollars for the cause, and although it has provided numerous grants and scholarships, perhaps its greatest contribution has come from raising awareness on the plight of the modern-day farmer. The organization provides much needed advocacy for the industry in a time of corporate domination. Unlike America's freedom-filled, pioneering beginnings – red tape, regulations and runarounds plague today's farmers and often do more harm to the bottom line than a swarm of ravenous locusts. The good news is that out of chaos often comes constructive change and hard-earned (but well learned) lessons. Farm Aid is leading the charge to change the system by working with local, regional and national organizations to promote fair farm policies.



John Mellencamp performs at the 25th Farm Aid, 2010 Milwaukee, Wisconsin

### **Lifting Up the Upper Midwest**

Farm Aid recently celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the agriculturally rich area of the Upper Midwest at Miller Park in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Upper Midwest, (consisting of five states) brags an impressive 350,000 farms on over 93 million acres of land. The staff of *Positive Impact Magazine* was invited backstage at the *Farm Aid 25: Growing Hope for America* concert in Wisconsin and experienced firsthand the energy behind this momentous effort. The innovative residents of this region are beginning to create and develop a new infrastructure for agriculture. In fact, Wisconsin itself is the poster child for a successfully implemented program

bringing farm fresh food to schools. Thirty-four school districts currently participate and serve as a role model for the future, utilizing healthful, locally produced foods while simultaneously improving Wisconsin's economy by developing new markets for farmers. It's a win/win situation and one that the rest of the nation is watching closely.



Dave Matthews performs at the 25th Farm Aid, 2010 Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## **Homegrown Help Is on the Way**

Farm Aid has taken on the task of becoming a helpful liaison during the rebuilding process. The organization has created several lifelines for farmers struggling to fortify this age-old industry from the inside-out. Not strictly about fundraising, they've vowed to put family farmers first, and in an effort to avoid corporate conflicts of interest, routinely reject sponsors that do not fit with their mission. Instead, they've focused on providing welcome resources for those that work the soil.

One such initiative is the online community, [www.homegrown.org](http://www.homegrown.org), which brings family farmers together to share their experiences, issues and resources. No longer isolated from the rest of the world, the website allows rural farmers to communicate and create much needed power in numbers at a time when they must all fight for a common goal. This new forum also links farmers and eaters. With a growing public movement toward consuming more fresh and wholesome foods, the website offers people information on how to access family farm food directly.

Another welcome asset for increasingly burdened farmers is the Farmer Resource Network designed to aid those in need. Whether they need help recovering from a natural disaster, want to become more sustainable and profitable, or simply access new markets, the organization helps connect farmers with nearly 500 farmer friendly resources across the country. They also help farmers expand their markets by getting their food in urban areas, grocery stores, schools and restaurants. Step-by-step, they hope to revamp local and regional food systems nationwide.

### **A Shining Example**

Farm Aid is doing its part to keep the American dream alive. Thanks to four musicians willing to share the transformative power of the spotlight, the foundation of the family farm system is steadily being rebuilt with added strength and resilience. Who would have thought that positive change could start with something so simple? Music has always had the ability to lift our spirits; now, with the help of Farm Aid, it may just lift up our way of life, as well.