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Joe Moore, owner of Moore's Family Farm, on his farm on Jan. 22, 2024, in Barren County, Kentucky. Moore raises beef, pork and lamb on the 475-acre, farm that has been in his family since 1810. Like most other farmers, he struggles with the age-old challenges of the profession — long hours of manual labor, unpredictable weather, unforgiving markets. And he's seen firsthand the toll these stressors can take on farmers' mental health. *Michael Swensen/Boyd's Station*

Stresses of farm life taking toll on farmers' mental health. What's being done to help?

Sophia Liang For the Courier Journal

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This story discusses suicide and mental health issues. If you're in crisis, help is available: Call the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988 or chatting online at 988Lifeline.org.

GLASGOW, Ky. — Joe Moore sat in a rocking chair on his front porch, peering out at the sloping green fields where his cattle were grazing. The wooden chair creaked as he leaned back and pulled a folded slip of paper from the pocket of his shirt.

Four years ago, on a hot, dry summer afternoon much like this one, Moore saw his neighbor cutting a field of red clover and stopped by to chat. His neighbor said he was worried about growing enough hay to feed all his cattle, and Moore tried to reassure him that it would rain soon enough.

Three days later, a Kentucky state trooper arrived at Moore’s home to tell him that his neighbor had gone missing. After several hours of searching, they discovered he had died by suicide.

“I never saw it coming,” Moore said. “It took me months to walk through my own house in the dark.”

Now, on his porch, Moore unfolded the paper to reveal a hand-scrawled list of names — the nine people he’s known who have taken their own lives.

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Moore raises beef, pork and lamb on a 475-acre farm in Barren County in south-central Kentucky that has been in his family since 1810.

Like most farmers, he struggles with the age-old challenges of the profession — long hours of manual labor, unpredictable weather, unforgiving markets. And he’s seen firsthand the toll these stressors can take on farmers’ mental health, even as they attempt to hide the extent of their struggles.

“They don’t talk about it,” Moore said. “They have so much pride. They don’t want nobody to know their business.”

Across the U.S., farmers are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population, according to data compiled by researchers at the University of Kentucky.

From 2004-17, 109 Kentucky farmers died by suicide.

But that’s likely an underestimate, researchers say, because some may disguise their suicides as accidents.

The COVID-19 pandemic added even more stress on farmers in recent years, though the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not publicly released farmer suicide data since 2019.

But as the obstacles facing Kentucky farmers have continued to grow, so too has the awareness surrounding their mental health. Policymakers, nonprofits, and individual advocates from around the state are devising creative ways to support farmers’ wellbeing and opening more honest conversations about the challenges of life on the farm.

‘All the tears I’ve cried’

Farming has never been an easy job, but it’s especially difficult for Kentucky farmers, who typically operate at smaller scales with thinner margins for error.

In Kentucky, the average farm size is just 171 acres, compared to the national average of 444 acres. Over 90% of farms in the state are family-owned, and two-thirds have annual sales of less than $10,000.

“Margins have gotten tighter and tighter and tighter over time as fuel prices are higher, feed costs are higher, land is obviously much higher,” said Alex Hagan, a farm veterinarian, cattle farmer and the former deputy state veterinarian at the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. “So, it’s very difficult for them to operate on a profitable level at a small scale.”

Such slim profits force many farmers to supplement their incomes with second jobs. For three decades, Moore worked full-time as a high school agriculture teacher and farmed at night, sometimes going out to the barn at 1 a.m. in the rain to take down his tobacco.

Even after retiring from teaching, he still works 10-12 hours a day on the farm.

“You know what a five-gallon bucket is?” he said wryly. “Probably wouldn’t hold all the tears I’ve cried.”

Small farms are also at outsized risk from unpredictable fluctuations in the weather, markets, global supply chains and government regulations.

One bad storm, one bad year

Paul Dennison is a produce farmer who sells fruits, vegetables, flowers and locally made products at a roadside store in Hart County, just east of Mammoth Cave National Park.

Over the course of his career, the 68-year-old has seen it all — diseased plants, wind-torn barn roofs, crop price collapses.

“A lot of people don’t really have a clue what goes on on the farm or how stressful it is,” Dennison said.

In one particularly unfortunate year in the ’80s, he lost his tobacco crop to a drought and couldn’t pay back the money he’d borrowed to plant it.

He applied for jobs in town but was unsuccessful. He managed to get his loans refinanced, but “it took me five or six years to recover from that one bad year,” Dennison said.

Former state agriculture commissioner Ryan Quarles describes farming as akin to gambling: “Farming is one of the only occupations I know of where you can do everything right and still lose money, because it just takes one bad storm or natural disaster to wipe out your productivity."

The pandemic, of course, made the instability worse.

Ila Dezarn and her husband had been part-time alpaca farmers in Nelson County, south of Louisville, for over a decade, and they has hoped to eventually grow their farm into a full-time endeavor.

But when the pandemic hit in 2020, Dezarn said, "everything just died on the vine." The tour groups shut down. The festivals and local yarn shops where they sold their products closed. The nearest fiber mill closed. Even the shearer who removed the fiber from the animals could no longer come by.

Unable to make back even the amount it cost to feed the animals, the couple was forced to close their farm in spring 2023 and sell their beloved alpacas.

"It was a large part of our lives that is just gone now," Dezarn said. "We even have a farm dog that we're trying to transition, to get him to spend more time at the house now instead of in the barn, and he's a little lost without his alpacas. And he's learning. But it's not easy."

Barriers to getting help in rural Kentucky

Yet, despite how prevalent these stressors are, many farmers feel they must confront them alone. Within their rural, predominantly masculine culture that values stoicism and self-sufficiency, mental health and mental illness remain heavily stigmatized.

"Farmers are so many different things," said Sarah Jones, whose family farms on 2,000 acres straddling the border between Allen County and Tennessee. "They're plumbers and electricians and veterinarians and agronomists and human resources. They're all these things. And so they think that they can handle their own health, and their mental health is one of those things that they don't reach out for help."

Unlike physical ailments, Jones added, mental health conditions are often erroneously perceived as a sign of weakness or failure: "It's like you're not strong enough. It's like you've caused this to yourself."

Even those who want help may not be able to find it. There are few mental health professionals in rural areas; 78% of counties in Kentucky and its neighboring states lack a psychiatrist. There are even fewer who are financially accessible for farmers without health insurance.

Carrie Shepperson calls farming her "other full-time job" on top of being a neonatal nurse. She speaks candidly about the benefits of seeing a therapist every two weeks: "I love me some therapy," she chuckled.

Her husband left his EMT job to farm full-time, but Shepperson feels she can't give up the employer-sponsored health insurance her nursing job provides, which pays for her therapy sessions, as well as the medicine for her autoinflammatory condition that would otherwise cost $34,000 a month.

“Even if we suddenly become insanely successful farmers, that would still be a huge concern of mine — what kind of access to health care and mental health care would I have?” she said.

Furthermore, therapists may not be knowledgeable about farmers’ culture and the specific challenges they face.

“Even if you were to try to get a therapist, if you had the time to take out of your day to call a therapist, with 96% of the population living urban lives, you think there’s a good chance that your therapist is going to understand what you’re talking about?” asked Madeline Rosenberg, a sheep farmer in Shelby County. “It’s so insular, in that only farmers know what farmers are going through.

“There really isn’t somewhere else for us to turn.”

How is the state addressing the problem?

In recent years, however, the public conversations around farmer mental health have risen to greater prominence. These, in turn, have prompted a growing coalition of Kentuckians to begin working to find solutions.

“I personally know of two farmers that have committed suicide,” said Quarles, the former agriculture commissioner. “Everybody knows somebody, and that’s how we knew it was a problem.”

Each year for the past four fiscal years, the Kentucky General Assembly has appropriated $500,000 to fund Raising Hope, a partnership between the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services and various state universities.

One of Raising Hope’s first projects was to offer “QPR” (Question, Persuade, Refer) trainings, a framework for recognizing and responding to the warning signs of suicide, to people across the state who work within or around the agricultural community.

Cheryl Witt, one of the founding members of the Raising Hope coalition and an assistant professor at the University of Louisville School of Nursing, said, “We felt like education, especially at the public level, would be a good place to start, because these are the people that interact with farmers on a day-to-day basis.”

Nathan Lawson, a cattle farmer and former director of the Kentucky Beef Council, said the QPR training from Raising Hope gave him greater confidence to have tough conversations about mental health with his fellow farmers.

“There’s this idea that rural folks, particularly farmers and agriculturalists, are self-reliant, independent, get it done … but at the end of the day, we all need friends,” he said. “We all need a team around us. We all need that connection.”

Sponsored by Raising Hope, Susan Jones, professor emerita at Western Kentucky University's School of Nursing, created an online course to teach health care professionals how to prevent farmer suicide through cultural understanding. Over 600 people have completed the training to date.

Dale Dobson, the safety administrator for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, has been teaching farm safety and farm rescue for 34 years — focused on injury prevention and proper equipment use.

But after his best friend took his own life in 2017, Dobson joined the Raising Hope team to address challenges to farmers' mental health in addition to their physical health.

He came up with the idea of passing out challenge coins, traditionally used in the military, as tangible tokens to show farmers their work is seen and valued.

"Just letting somebody know they're appreciated, you care, you love them, can make all the difference in the world," Dobson said. "We know of four different people in the state of Kentucky today that are alive because of somebody visiting them, shaking their hands, and talking to them."

One of the challenge coin designs reads, "You Are Appreciated" with the number 988. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a free, confidential, 24/7 support hotline launched across the U.S. in summer 2022, and the state legislature has also allocated another $20 million to expand its impact in Kentucky.

Although this is a national hotline, Angela Roberts, the program administrator for the hotline in Kentucky, said her goal is for as many calls as possible to be answered locally.

Currently, 83% of the 2,000-plus calls each month are answered at one of the 14 call centers within Kentucky. Responders have been trained through Susan Jones's course to respond specifically to farmers' concerns.

Roberts and Quarles both emphasize that resources such as Raising Hope and the 988 hotline are not only for people experiencing suicidal ideation but also for anyone who wants to manage their day-to-day stress before it escalates.

"Mental health should be taken as seriously as physical health," Quarles said. "If you're a farmer and you get injured on the farm, working in hazardous conditions, you go see the doctor, or you may have to go to the ER. We've got to have the same messaging towards those suffering from mental health issues.

"It's OK to see a doctor. It's OK to reach out to your family and friends, to have somebody to talk to."

In 2020, the legislature designated the third Wednesday of each September "Farmer Suicide Prevention Day," and on this day in 2023, it celebrated the inaugural Raising Hope Farmer Appreciation and Awards Day with a ceremony in Frankfort.

Rep. Brandon Reed, R-Hodgenville, one of the legislators who worked to establish and fund Raising Hope, said Kentucky is one of the first states to create robust programs addressing rural mental health challenges.

The state Department of Agriculture has begun collaborating with other states, including Georgia and Tennessee, to share its resources further.

“A lot of states are reaching out to us, and they’re actually getting our program to copy in their states,” Reed said.

An eighth-generation farmer

Other initiatives are more local in their focus.

Laura Weddle, the extension specialist for Farm Stress and Rural Mental Health at UK, and Julie Marfell, a UK nurse, created the BARN (Bringing Awareness Right Now) Dinner Theater event.

In BARN, county extension agents work with schools and local groups to recruit teens or adults to get certified in QPR.

The participants develop skits about mental health challenges, coping skills and suicide and present them at a dinner event for a crowd of 150–200 attendees.

In between each skit, the attendees are encouraged to share their personal experiences and discuss what they’ve learned with others at their table. The close-knit community within each county extension office might otherwise heighten fears of stigma or social judgment, but in this context, it promotes trust and engagement.

“Each one is so unique,” Weddle said. “Each community has its own different set of challenges, and you see that reflected in each of these skits.”

Since launching in 2021, the BARN team has held four events in Kentucky and shared its model with other states. And its focus on educating adolescents in schools reflects a larger trend of younger farmers addressing the topic of mental health head-on.

Ty Jones, the 16-year-old son of Sarah Jones and grandson of Susan Jones, has been working on his parents’ farm his whole life.

He owns all the sheep on the farm, as well as some of his own cows and pigs. In addition to taking six dual-credit college classes in high school, he spends 4–5 hours every school day and 12–14 hours a day on the weekend doing everything from feeding his animals to selling them online.

In April, after learning about the Raising Hope challenge coins, he wanted to bring the initiative to his local 4-H club. He led a group of 16 high schoolers in each giving out four challenge coins to farmers who’ve made an impact on them.

Farmers usually “only hear bad news,” Ty said, and they rarely get to hear that they’re appreciated. “Through farming and being in the farming community, you can see and tell that there is a lot of stress and a lot of hardship.”

Even knowing the difficulty of the road ahead, however, Ty can’t see himself choosing any other path.

“Getting to see the lifecycle of the plants and animals and knowing that what you’re doing is positively impacting so many people really does mean a lot,” he said. “And being an eighth-generation farmer on my mother and my dad’s farm makes it more rewarding to me. I don’t want to be the generation that doesn’t farm and doesn’t be the one to continue the family’s legacy.

“There’s so many good things that come out of farming, but just the bad things override it from time to time.”

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