

# Let's talk... about farmers: Trump's Trade War and a looming mental health crisis

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## Abstract

Donald Trump's aggressive stance on trade has led to heavy tariffs on US agricultural products. This has exposed American farmers to a high amount of volatility and work stress. Suicides in America have drastically increased since the late 1990's, and agriculture has been one of the hardest-hit industries with suicide rates far above the national average. The added stress of Trump's trade war has the potential to exacerbate the growing rates of depression and suicide among farmers and agricultural workers. The Trump administration's attempt to ease the strain on farmers with simple monetary compensation has been heavily criticized for its short-sighted nature, and pundits highlight the need for a long-term solution. However, this issue is not limited to the United States and has been observed in several countries around the world, and none have yet identified an effective resolution. A greater response is needed by federal governments to aid farmers and stabilize agricultural markets, as national advocacy groups struggle to provide essential resources to those in need and improve the rates of suicide and depression among farmers.

Since being sworn in as President of the United States of America in 2017, Donald Trump has maintained a regular presence in the daily news cycle. There is no denying that Trump's policies have affected millions, if not billions, of people worldwide. President Trump has made headlines with his stance on trade and the tariffs he has imposed on other nations. While these tariffs are intended to benefit the citizens he represents, the major outcome so far has been the start of what some have deemed a global trade war that has harmed many Americans, particularly those that rely on international trade for their livelihood.<sup>1</sup> One of the hardest-hit groups has been the farmers of America's heartland.<sup>2</sup> China, Canada, and Mexico have been significant targets of Trump's tariffs and happen to be the top three export markets for US agriculture, meaning retaliatory tariffs could cost

American farmers billions of dollars.<sup>1-4</sup> American farmers already face poor psychosocial working conditions and high suicide rates, and the added financial stress and uncertainty created by Trump's trade policies threatens to push this population to a crisis point.<sup>5</sup>

Mental health and suicide have become the focus of significant attention in the last decade, and rightfully so: a report by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) demonstrated a nearly 30% increase in suicide rates across the United States since 1999.<sup>6</sup> Notably, only 54% of suicide decedents in this report had any documented history of mental health conditions, and many other factors including work and financial stress were found to play important roles in these suicides.<sup>6</sup> Farming is notoriously stressful, as a successful operation relies on several external factors such as weather, disease, market variability, and governmental regulation.<sup>7</sup> This vulnerability to external factors leads to very high levels of financial uncertainty, which can even result in negative net incomes in some years.<sup>7</sup> As farms are often family-run and provide the major source of income for the household, there is an incredible psychosocial pressure to produce in highly variable economic and political environments.<sup>7</sup> These working conditions have been important contributors to a growing epidemic of depression and suicide among American farmers.<sup>8</sup>

A 2016 study by the CDC investigating suicide across occupational groups found that individuals working in farming, fishing, or forestry occupations experienced the highest suicide rates of any groups, with a rate of 84.5 per 100,000 individuals, more than six times the national rate of 13.42 per 100,000 individuals.<sup>9,10</sup> It has been reported that this 2016 CDC report conflated farmer and agricultural worker suicides, a categorizing error on the part of the authors.<sup>11</sup> However, other studies have confirmed that the main message remains the same: farmers are experiencing suicide rates far above the national average.<sup>12-14</sup> As a group, farmers make up a very small percentage of Americans with less than 2% of the population being employed directly in agriculture as of 2016.<sup>15</sup> The fact that farmers make up such a small portion of the population is likely a key contributor to the suicide epidemic among agricultural workers going largely unnoticed by the public. However, national advocacy groups such as FarmAid and AgrAbility have started programs to bring this issue to the attention of policy makers and provide mental health resources to farmers.<sup>16</sup> In early 2018, a FarmAid-backed bill was tabled in the House of Representatives outlining the *Stemming the Tide of Rural Economic Stress and Suicide (STRESS) Act*.<sup>17,18</sup> If passed, the STRESS Act would be a huge step forward, greatly increasing the mental health resources available to farmers and rural residents by providing affordable, confidential

mental health services to agricultural workers, a 24/7 crisis line, therapy and support groups, as well as other counselling services.<sup>18</sup> This may come too late, however, as the extra resources are needed now as American farmers struggle to cope in the current economic climate created largely by President Trump's aggressive stance on international trade.<sup>19</sup>

Studies on farmer suicide in India, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom demonstrate that this problem is global in scale, and not limited to the United States.<sup>20-23</sup> The reasons behind suicide are both regional and individual but, across the world, access to health services in rural locales is poor compared to urban centres and rural community culture can often be less accommodating of mental illness.<sup>24-30</sup> Increased awareness of these issues has led to some progress, but the situation remains largely unchanged.<sup>31</sup> While national advocacy organizations are working to provide resources that support the mental health of farmers, governments need to be more active in helping to stem the tide of suicides. Federal governments hold the power to institute policies that creates a more favourable economic climate and help to stabilize the markets for livestock and crops, thus targeting a root cause of farmer suicide.<sup>8,32,33</sup> Some have pointed to the Canadian dairy and poultry's supply management as a model of how stability can be effectively introduced into the agricultural marketplace, but others label this as interfering in the free market – citing its effects on average citizens who consume agricultural products – and farmers in these industries may not be any better off than their counterparts in less regulated sectors.<sup>34-36</sup> It appears that Trump has realized the financial impact of his policies, as it was announced that the Trump administration would implement a multi-billion plan to help farmers through a variety of measures, including providing subsidies and buying unsold crops.<sup>37</sup> Agriculture industry groups have criticized this move as a temporary solution to a long-term problem that could have lasting affects for years to come.<sup>37,38</sup> The new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) trade deal will help farmers to access the North American market, but the ongoing United States-China trade disputes are severely limiting exports to what has traditionally been one of America's largest trading partners for agricultural goods.<sup>39</sup> Reopening trade with China would go a long way in helping relieve the strain on American farmers. Clearly a more concerted effort is needed, from both the American government and federal governments worldwide.

The trade war, instigated by President Trump, has resulted in the implementation of tariffs on many agricultural products. This is predicted to have a dramatic impact on the exportation of livestock and crops from the United States to their major trading partners.<sup>40</sup> These tariffs are advertised by President Trump as a tactic to advance US interests, but it has caused a major strain on the welfare of American farmers and agricultural workers. Farmers already suffer from depression and suicide at rates far above that which is observed in the general population, and the additional financial strains created by the US government threaten to exacerbate a growing mental health crisis.<sup>10,12</sup> Numerous advocacy groups representing American farmers are providing essential resources to those in need, but without governmental assistance in the form of funding and policy change, these organizations will be hard-pressed to improve the well-being of farmers.<sup>17</sup> Swift changes to trade legislation and stabilization of the agricultural marketplace

are needed to counteract Trump's trade policies and, hopefully, limit a large-scale suicide epidemic among America's farmers.<sup>8,19,34</sup>

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