

Trent Loos, Loup City, Neb., Column: Farming's days may be numbered in U.S.

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By Trent Loos

LOUP CITY, Neb. — The United States was founded on the premise that control of one's own destiny is essential to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"; but as a sixth-generation farmer, I am concerned this is no longer the case for today's food producers, who face increased government interference and severe economic pressure.

Without question, the economic health of American agriculture must be of paramount concern. And it's essential that we start asking where our foods will come from if America's farmers and ranchers are forced to exit the business because it no longer is profitable.

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Today's elected officials simply have lost touch with reality and, I fear, are unaware of the risks associated with not being able to provide nutrition for one's citizens. By mandating regulations that increase costs, not only in animal agriculture but also the cost of doing business, the officials cut even more into profits on the farm.

I recently visited a feedlot in Scottsbluff, Neb., where the owner showed me the latest government-mandated environmental quality protection that is costing him \$50 per head to implement. All the while he was on the phone selling a pen of cattle that he was happy to only lose \$100 per head feeding.

In early June, pork producers were losing \$30 per head. Likewise, I've been on three dairies in the past month where the owners have told me they were losing between \$50 and \$60 per cow per day.

Let me do a little cowboy arithmetic for you. A father/son 200-cow dairy will lose \$300,000 in 2009, and the really sad fact is that if corn prices are \$5 a bushel come fall, I am not sure the corn farmer is going to be profitable either.

Then there is the new "cow tax," which some are estimating will add another \$10 million annually in costs to the U.S. livestock industry.

The Heritage Foundation estimated that the global warming legislation moving through Congress would cause a significant drop in farmers' net income. Farm income is expected to fall \$8 billion in 2012, \$25 billion in 2024 and more than \$50 billion in 2035.

Also being overlooked are the efficiency gains made by U.S. agriculture over the years. For instance, it took 100 man-hours in the 1930s to produce 100 bushels of wheat, and it now only takes one hour. The production of a gallon of milk required 65 percent more water, 90 percent more landmass and resulted in 63 percent more carbon output in 1944 than at present.

And pork producers have moved from 4 pounds of feed per pound of gain to only 2.8 pounds of feed, a 30 percent improvement in efficiency.

American agriculture is sustainable and green. Our farmers and ranchers know what it takes to provide for our food security while protecting our environment, but to continue with that responsibility they need — and deserve — the support and trust of our elected officials and American citizens.

Loos and his wife work cattle and train horses on their ranch in central Nebraska.