

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 2

Greeno Acres

Kendall, Wisconsin

Organizing body: 1

Scale: 160 acres of pasture

Type: for profit

Currently producing: raw milk

In operation: since 1993

Iconic plant/animal: dairy cow

Websites: Family Farm Defenders: www.familyfarmdefenders.org

National Family Farm Coalition: www.nffc.net

La Via Campesina International: Viacampesina.org

Third-generation Wisconsin dairy farmer Joel Greeno has been farming for more than fifteen years and is the current president of the American Raw Milk Producers Pricing Association (ARMPPA), an organization of dairy farmers dedicated to establishing a raw milk price that returns to dairy producers their cost of production plus a profit.

Greeno is also the vice president of Family Farm Defenders, the founder of the Scenic Central

Milk Producers Cooperative, and serves on the executive committee of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) as a representative of ARMPPA. NFFC is the U.S. branch of La Via Campesina, the largest farmer organization in the world. These folks make translocal connections between their Wisconsin life and peasant farmers all over the world, often traveling to farmer summits in Europe and Latin America.

Greeno participates in protests and advocacy for farmers' rights while maintaining a head of forty dairy cows. On top of it all, he still steals time to participate in tractor pulls with his friends on the weekends.

Did you grow up on a dairy farm?

Joel Greeno, founder: Oh, yeah. I've been milking cows since I was ten years old. But ever since I could walk I was in the barn, doing chores of some kind, or feeding cows or calves. During harvest season, I was bailing hay and unloading hay and mowing hay. I spent all summer putting it up and all winter feeding it up. I bought this place in 1990 and then brought cattle here in '93. Been farming here ever since.

Could you say a little bit about the land and the context here?

There are a lot of traditional family farms here, and a lot of these farmers pasture one single lot that's used continuously throughout the summer. But I do rotational grazing, whereby you rotate the cow every few days throughout individual managed paddocks. This way, there isn't as much fuel going through tractors and equipment, and I cut down on fossil fuel too by not using

commercial fertilizers. I'm probably looked at as the oddball because of that.

What motivated you to attend your first meeting around farmer activist work?

In October 1996, "Black Friday" happened: Farmers' milk prices dropped six dollars a hundredweight over a two-month period, which was almost 30 percent at the time. It left all farmers in an income crunch, struggling to pay bills. People's parents were getting put out of business. I began to wonder, "Why?"

In February '97, I was invited to a meeting of the American Raw Milk Producers Pricing Association. I met John Kinsman, Francis Goodman, and others, joined the organization, and eighteen months later I became president.

Initially, I set up small local meetings but never really spoke to a crowd—just arranged things, introduced people, let them handle it. But in September of that same year, my grandfather passed away at eighty-eight years old. From his funeral, I got in a van and drove all the way to upstate New York, where I was told I would be the opening speaker in front of four hundred farmers. I had some major butterflies, but I told my family's story, talked about my grandfather's passing, how we were all in this together, that milk prices weren't fair, and that we could work together to fix it. A lot of people get choked up. But people came together. We created a good, solid organization.

What led you to establish the Scenic Central Milk Producers Cooperative?

I recruited a group of farmers who'd agreed to be the interim directors of the co-op, and they

filed the articles of incorporation. We were naive to think we could have a co-op up running in a month or two—we ended up fighting state of Wisconsin red tape for ten months to obtain all of our permits and inspections.

In ten years' time, we were able to grow from the smallest co-op in the United States to the fortieth largest in the country. We're very successful in what we do: marketing farmers' milk, paying top prices, providing excellent services, providing retirement plans in the form of Roth IRAs, Christmas bonuses . . . things to benefit farmers.

What inspired you to join so many organizations and coalitions?

Meeting John Kinsman and also becoming a member of the American Raw Milk Producers—and eventually becoming the vice president. Through that organization and Family Farm Defenders, we look at the whole picture; we know we're not going to fix the milk situation by just dealing with milk. Everything is interwoven, and in order to save dairy farmers, we have to look at all farmers and take on the actions to protect all farmers, whether they are milking cows, organic or conventional, or raising corn and beans.

That's the nice part of the National Family Farm Coalition: You have a wide range of almost forty farm organizations coming together under a common banner, sharing their problems and supporting each other. Through the NFFC, we found that contract poultry growers were some of the earliest hit by corporate agriculture, in that you owned a farm but basically owned nothing else. The big corporations would come and say, "We'll build you facilities, we'll provide you

with feed, we'll provide you with chickens, you raise those chickens, and then you sell those chickens to us, and this is how much you will make." But they don't tell you that if one bird dies, you have to pay for it. Then it went to hogs, then cattle, and dairy was last.

How do commodity brokers and financial spectators affect the price that you get for milk?

There is near direct correlation between what farmers get paid for raw milk and the forty-pound cheddar price on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, where agricultural commodities are bought, traded, and sold. That cheese market is not supposed to have any impact on my milk market.

There is lots of talk that "it's supply and demand," but if you take a milk supply line and put it on a graph, and put the dairy farmers' pay price on that same graph, you have a slow, steady, 1.4 average increase per year in milk production, and farmers' pay price looks like a heart monitor.

There is no correlation.

You basically have a triangle of three that control every aspect of the dairy industry: Kraft Foods, which controls 40 percent of the cheese market; Dean Foods, which controls 40 percent of the fluid market; and Grassland in butter. Each has their turf, and nobody interferes on their turf.

What impact has international networking had on you?

National Family Farm Coalition is affiliated with the international network of La Via Campesina. It makes me feel a little stronger knowing that I have people in other countries who support me, who are fighting the same fight, and, in a lot of cases, we are fighting a common enemy: multinational, transnational companies that are using each country's unique situation to basically

control markets worldwide. We are exposing that by all working altogether.

Those of us who organize here have been extremely impressed with the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), the landless peasant workers movement in Brazil, and with just how committed they are to the movement. They face being killed, at gunpoint, and still continue the movement even under the worst odds, the worst conditions. They make you hope to someday have that level of commitment. MST has done so much more with less. We need to step it up here. There's some of us who joke that organizing farmers is kind of like herding cats or trying to keep frogs in a wheelbarrow: You put three in and two escape.

In what ways would you like to see progressive land reform happen in the United States?

Well, it's always been a good thing that farmers have owned land, but today, most of the land isn't owned by the people farming it. It's rented land bought out by companies and real estate brokers and developers. That kind of removes the personal touch, meaning you don't have the respect for that land as if it were your own. And it tends to lead to management decisions that aren't in the best interest of food concerns or quality of food—you get into the issues of genetically modified crops, soybeans, and even into the issue of patenting life. Does Monsanto have the right to say, "We now own corn"? Is that right?

How can different sectors of agriculture, and specifically dairy, strike a balance between

large- and small-scale operations that work?

Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) is so big and powerful that it's able to control markets, cheat markets, and even break the law. You get to be so big that you're not really held accountable.

Our plan with ARMPPA is to have a series of small-run co-ops that work for a select group of farmers and work together through marketing agencies in common (MACs). We try to compliment and protect one another, not be the big bully on the block. We do everything by cooperation and in the best interest of the farmer and the consumer. We keep things balanced to avoid creating an environment where you benefit by an upswing or a downswing.

Where would you like to see farmers in five years?

I'd like to see more family farms on the land. I'd like to see farmers working together better.

Wisconsin used to be covered with successful, small, family cheese operations. We don't need extreme consolidation in the marketplace; we don't need plant closures; we don't need central, larger facilities, because more, smaller facilities will employ more people over greater area.

Corporate agriculture is not in it for quality. They're not looking out for the consumer or the farmer, they're just in it to make money, pure and simple.

People need to recognize the fact that there are only four sources of the world's raw material: agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, and mining. Agriculture is 70 percent of all raw

material. Farmers are absolutely vital, because it's kind of hard to eat oil or trees; fish is okay, but there is only so much. No matter what, everybody's got to eat every day or our days are numbered. That's it in a nutshell.