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THE POLARIZATION SURROUNDING AGRICULTURE IN AMERICA

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This Note evaluates the divides surrounding agricultural production in the United States. Part One lays out how the agricultural industry's relationship with society evolved from the founding of the nation to the twenty-first century. Part Two explores the way politics create and grow division surrounding agricultural policy between political parties and how farmers feel divided from the political process. Part Three takes up how farmers and society are separated in terms of the growing climate change and anti-meat diet movements. Part Four concludes by considering how farmers are being affected by the issues laid out in Part Two and Part Three in terms of the social stigma they face and the growing mental health crisis in rural America.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is deeply ingrained in a history of agriculture. Founding fathers George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison are well known for helping form the nation, but many do not realize that their vision for the nation was rooted in their other profession: farming.¹ These agrarian roots are so deep that Jefferson believed the United States would be an agrarian-based society full of small independent farmers who would run the American economy.² In eighteenth century America, the importance of family farming and widespread property ownership went hand-in-hand with the reliance on Locke's view of appropriating nature as property for people.³ This reliance was so prevalent that ninety percent of workers in the country were farmers.⁴ In 1840, farmers made up twenty percent less of the nation's workforce, signaling a shift towards industrialization.⁵ Throughout the early nineteenth century, agriculture remained central to the United States' economy as it made up a majority of the nation's exports.⁶ By 1890, farmers made up just 43% of the workforce, even though politicians kept agricultural producers at the forefront of the economy with the creation of the United States Department of Agriculture and the passage of pro-farmer legislation such as the Homestead Act, the Morrill Act, and the Hatch Act.⁷ Through the twentieth century, technological innovations, such as tractors, allowed individual farmers to increase efficiency.⁸ These innovations led to less need for individual man hours which, in turn, led to even more individuals moving to the city.⁹ This trend away from the farm continued through the turn of the century and led to farmers making up just 2.6% of the labor force in the 1990, and just 1.3% in 2021.¹⁰ In 2024,

1. Erin Wayman, *Founding Fathers, Great Gardeners*, SMITHSONIAN MAG. (Aug. 2011), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/founding-fathers-great-gardeners-17209323/>.

2. Linda A. Malone, *Reflections on the Jeffersonian Ideal of an Agrarian Democracy and the Emergence of an Agricultural and Environmental Ethic in the 1990 Farm Bill*, 12 STAN. ENV'T L.J. 3, 3 (1993).

3. James Phillips, *American Agrarianism's Answers to the Nation's (In)Securities*, 9 CONN. PUB. INT. L.J. 343, 344 (2010) (quoting BRENT GILCHRIST, *CULTUS AMERICANUS: VARIETIES OF THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE, 1600–1865* 238 (2006)).

4. Haley Zynda, *The History of American Agriculture*, KNOX CNTY. AGRIC. NEWS (July 4, 2022, 7:04 AM), <https://u.osu.edu/knoxcountyag/2022/07/04/the-history-of-american-agriculture/>.

5. *Id.*; see generally Malone, *supra* note 2.

6. See Zynda, *supra* note 4.

7. See *id.*

8. See *id.*

9. See *id.*

10. *Id.*; *Ag and Food Sectors and the Economy*, USDA ECON. RSCH. SERV., <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy> (last visited Feb. 12, 2024).

with farmers in the United States making up just a fraction of the labor force, multiple issues present themselves.

As the farming workforce changed, the politics surrounding agriculture did too. While agriculture was still at the forefront of society, President Abraham Lincoln formed the Department of Agriculture in order to regulate an industry that still demanded full political attention.¹¹ The Lincoln Administration also created the Homestead Act, which awarded land to pioneers promising to farm the land, and the Morrill Act, which granted each state large pieces of land for the purpose of creating land grant institutions.¹² These land grant institutions were created with the goal of learning how to make agriculture more efficient.¹³ These institutions were further supported by the Hatch Act of 1887, which granted more land for agricultural experiments in order to combat declines in agricultural production.¹⁴ Following the turn of the century, the Farm Bureau and the Cooperative Extension Service were created to improve farm productivity by passing along the information gained from the land grant institutions' research.¹⁵

With farmers facing serious struggles during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, Congress passed the first version of the Farm Bill, the most important piece of agricultural legislation.¹⁶ The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, which was part of the New Deal, allowed producers to reduce their surplus crops by selling them for a reasonable price in order to achieve "parity," or a fair price for their products, when the market price fell below the cost farmers incurred producing them.¹⁷ Over the course of the twentieth century, the Farm Bill saw many changes where farmers were still the main focus, but in 1973, the Farm Bill was modified to include food assistance program funding.¹⁸ The nutrition aspect of the Farm Bill received various names over the years as it evolved into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ("SNAP"), which accounts for more than eighty percent of funds allocated by the Farm Bill.¹⁹ Unlike the Farm Bills passed before 1973, which focused primarily on farmers, the modern iteration of the Farm Bill possesses an

11. See Zynda, *supra* note 4.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*; see Luke Goldstein, *How Washington Bargained Away Rural America*, AM. PROSPECT (May 24, 2023), <https://prospect.org/power/2023-05-24-how-washington-bargained-away-rural-america/>.

17. Sidonie Devarenne, *History of the United States Farm Bill*, LIBR. CONG., <https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=1821e70c01de48ae899a7ff708d6ad8b> (last visited Oct. 31, 2023); Goldstein, *supra* note 16.

18. See Devarenne, *supra* note 17.

19. *Id.*; Goldstein, *supra* note 16.

omnibus nature due to a broader range of stakeholders.²⁰ As agriculture legislation shifted away from a farmer-first mindset, a divide grew between agricultural producers and the politicians passing legislation affecting them.

Just as politics cultivated a lack of focus on farmers, the American public distanced themselves from farming being intertwined with their daily lives. In the late eighteenth century, ninety percent of people called farming their main profession; however, the other ten percent were still involved in raising some of their own food, along with managing food for their horses they used for transportation.²¹ Despite the widespread public involvement in farming, the nineteenth century saw a slow-moving shift towards urbanization, and by 1880, three out of ten Americans lived in cities.²² This movement was due in part to technological advances in farming that allowed individual farmers to supply food to larger amounts of people.²³ This city-oriented trend continued through the twentieth century with farmers making up just 2.6% of the workforce in 1990.²⁴ Around the same period, studies on climate change emerged and identified links between emissions and the rising temperatures on Earth.²⁵ With the population no longer actively involved in agriculture, farmers became an easy target for climate change activists.²⁶ Climate change is not the only social change that farmers now face. Motivated by an animal-rights mindset, activists began pushing meat-free diets in the 1970s.²⁷ This fueled a movement where organizations, such as PETA, created provoking public campaigns to paint meat producers as evil, even going so far as analogizing animals raised for meat to serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's victims.²⁸ This social pressure and movement has led to the rise of plant-based and cell-based products being labeled as healthy meat

20. Devarenne, *supra* note 17.

21. DAN ALLOSSO, *AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY* 177 (2017).

22. *Id.*

23. Mary Bellis, *History of American Agriculture: American Agriculture 1776-1990*, THOUGHTCO. (Aug. 27, 2021), <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-american-agriculture-farm-machinery-4074385>.

24. *Id.*

25. See *A Brief History of Climate Change Discoveries*, U.K. RSCH. & INNOVATION, <https://www.discover.ukri.org/a-brief-history-of-climate-change-discoveries/index.html> (last visited Nov. 1, 2023); for a more recent study, see John Lynch et al., *Agriculture's Contribution to Climate Change and Role in Mitigation Is Distinct From Predominantly Fossil CO₂-Emitting Sectors*, *FRONTIERS SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYS.* (Feb. 3, 2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2020.518039/full>.

26. See, e.g., Tom Steward, *New Farmer-Led Group Takes on Environmental Activists*, *AM. EXPERIMENT* (Dec. 20, 2023), <https://www.americanexperiment.org/new-farmer-led-group-takes-on-environmental-activists/>.

27. HAYLEE VITALE, *THE MODERN ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES (1970-2000)* 6-7 (2021), <https://georgian.edu/wp-content/uploads/Vitale-Haylee-2022-2.pdf>.

28. *Id.*

alternatives.²⁹ The growth of this movement likely has many meat producers feeling like their livelihoods are being attacked.

Throughout the country's transition from an agrarian society to an urbanized one, many have overlooked the impact that the transition has had on agricultural producers. While farmers helped shape the foundation of this country, their role in society has been slowly overlooked by the growing urban and semi-urban populations.³⁰ From the beginning, farmers have settled in rural areas, which naturally leads to isolation from others in terms of geography and class.³¹ As new means of communication developed, some isolation concerns subsided but many still plagued the people who work to feed the rest of the nation.³² Rural isolation, coupled with economic and social pressures and environmental concerns, continue to cause farmers to face a mental health crisis that many in society overlook.³³

With the background of American agriculture in mind, this Note discusses different divides that face American farmers and the effects they have on them. The discussion proceeds as follows: Part Two explores how the two major political parties cannot agree on the best way to pass beneficial legislation for farmers and how farmers and politicians view each other in positive and negative ways. Part Three then discusses the social issues facing farmers in the realm of climate change and population growth, as well as the growing villainization of meat-producing farmers in the country. Part Four concludes by evaluating how the divide discussed in Part Two and the social pressures discussed in Part Three combine to have serious negative effects on the future of young farmers in America, and the mental health crisis that all farmers are currently facing.

II. POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND AGRICULTURE

In the twenty-first century, when most issues divide the nation politically, the production of agriculture is no exception. As agriculture has advanced and changed in scope over the years, the political administration of agricultural policies did as well.³⁴ Almost all of those in politics agree on the need for evolution, while also acknowledging that there are many disagreements on how to implement the changes

29. See Natalie R. Rubio et al., *Plant-Based and Cell-Based Approaches to Meat Production*, 11 NATURE COMM'NS 6276, 6277 (2020).

30. AM. HIST. ASS'N, SHALL I TAKE UP FARMING? 2 (1945).

31. See Kenyon L. Butterfield, *The Social Problems of American Farmers*, 10 AM. J. SOCIO. 606, 611 (1905).

32. See *id.*

33. See *Rural Response to Farmer Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, RURAL HEALTH INFO. HUB, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/farmer-mental-health> (last updated Nov. 1, 2023).

34. See Charles M. Hardin, *The Politics of Agriculture in the United States*, 32 J. FARM ECON. 571, 578-79 (1950).

necessary.³⁵ These disagreements span both party lines and between farmers and the politicians in Washington, D.C.³⁶ Though these problems have been around for decades, they continue to plague the political processes surrounding agriculture.³⁷

A. The Polarization Between the Political Right and Left

Electoral maps highlight a key divide in the politics surrounding agriculture. This divide is not confined to merely red states and blue states; even on a county level, there is a major divide between the rural areas, which tend to favor the political right, and metropolitan areas, which tend to favor the political left.³⁸ This divide was so evident, that in a poll before the 2020 presidential election, eighty-five percent of farmers responded that they supported the Republican nominee over the Democratic nominee.³⁹ These political differences should not be surprising given that people in rural areas and urban areas are shaped by their environment and the life experiences that go along with it.⁴⁰

A key example of this divide is the quinquennially-recurring piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill. While the Farm Bill originated with the intent to help farmers and rural America through hardships, it is now primarily filled with content meant to benefit those in cities.⁴¹ The Farm Bill is a piece of legislation that politicians use to set the federal government's policy surrounding agriculture through incentivizing technological advances, crop insurance, initiatives for conservation, commodity pricing supports, and a low-income food safety program.⁴² Many of these programs are essential for farmers to maintain their livelihoods in times of low commodity prices or natural disasters.⁴³ However, this bill slowly became "the token example of legislative dysfunction in Washington."⁴⁴ Since the 1970s,

35. *See id.*

36. *See id.*

37. *See* Danielle Resnick et al., *The Political Economy of Reforming Costly Agricultural Policies*, BROOKINGS (Mar. 10, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-political-economy-of-reforming-costly-agricultural-policies/>.

38. Guian McKee, *Our Urban/Rural Political Divide is Both New – and Decades in the Making*, WASH. POST (Oct. 8, 2021, 6:00 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/10/08/our-urban-rural-political-divide-is-both-new-decades-making/>.

39. Willem Roper, *Farmers Support Trump*, STATISTA (Oct. 21, 2020), <https://www.statista.com/chart/23242/farmers-presidential-election/>.

40. Sara Savat, *The Divide Between Us: Urban-Rural Political Differences Rooted in Geography*, SOURCE (Feb. 18, 2020), <https://source.wustl.edu/2020/02/the-divide-between-us-urban-rural-political-differences-rooted-in-geography/>.

41. *See* Goldstein, *supra* note 16.

42. Peter Shipley, *The Great Divide: Political Polarization and the U.S. Farm Bill*, 6 XAVIER J. POL. 1, 1 (2015).

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

nutritional programs attracted urban congressmen to the Farm Bill, while the funding of crop insurance, conservation initiatives, and commodity price supports attracted rural congressmen.⁴⁵ However, the politicians on either side refuse to leave their partisan ideals behind when debating on what should be in the Farm Bill and how much funding each program should receive.⁴⁶ This adherence to party lines was especially clear in 2018 when every Democrat and 30 Republicans voted against the Farm Bill, in an effort to instead make decisions on immigration policy before deciding on “the biggest safety net for millions of farmers across the country.”⁴⁷ This political decision left many producers feeling like they were mere “pawns” in a political chess match in which neither side actually cared about their interests.⁴⁸

B. The Polarization Between Producers and Politicians

While many men and women wake up every morning to work to feed the nation, many elected officials forget that their decisions in Washington D.C. affect the livelihoods of people who provide the nation’s food security.⁴⁹ Many people in politics believe that farmers and rural Americans are “hillbillies” who are dedicated to the political right;⁵⁰ but, in reality, many farmers only want to see people in office who care about them.⁵¹ Sadly, many farmers feel that they do not have proper representation and that politicians would rather line their pockets than help them.⁵²

A growing number of farmers believe that elected officials, on both sides of the political aisle, are not fighting for their best interests when making decisions on what legislation should pass.⁵³ In the twenty-first century, many farmers feel

45. *Id.* at 8.

46. *Id.* at 6.

47. Kelsey Snell & Brian Naylor, *House Farm Bill Fails as Conservatives Revolt Over Immigration*, NPR (May 18, 2018, 10:06 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/18/612203191/house-farm-bill-in-jeopardy-as-leaders-court-conservatives>.

48. See Zippy Duvall, *Don’t Use the Farm Bill as a Bargaining Chip*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED’N: ZIPLINE (May 23, 2018), <https://www.fb.org/the-zipline/don-8217-t-use-the-farm-bill-as-a-bargaining-chip>.

49. *See id.*

50. See, e.g., Frank Rich, *No Sympathy for the Hillbilly*, INTELLIGENCER, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/frank-rich-no-sympathy-for-the-hillbilly.html> (last visited Jan. 29, 2024).

51. E.g., Erin Anthony, *Farmers Make Sure Agriculture is Well Represented in Voter Turnout*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED’N: FBNEWS (Nov. 1, 2022), <https://www.fb.org/fbnews/farmers-make-sure-agriculture-is-well-represented-in-voter-turnout>.

52. ROBERT BONNIE ET AL., UNDERSTANDING RURAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION IN AMERICA 18 (2020).

53. Dan Kaufman, *How Suffering Farmers May Determine Trump’s Fate*, NEW YORKER (Aug. 10, 2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/17/how-suffering-farmers-may-determine-trumps-fate>.

disenchanted by both political parties, and therefore, have voted for presidential candidates from both parties in the hope they can find someone to implement change beneficial to them.⁵⁴ Though a majority of farmers still lean towards the political right, they are far more nonpartisan in their political views because they feel their agrarian lifestyle has been disenfranchised by both sides of the political aisle in Washington D.C.⁵⁵ In the face of farmers' detachment from politics, organizations such as the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Union seek to close the divide.⁵⁶ This is a difficult task, considering that farmers have a general distrust of the government,⁵⁷ and many farmers view any attempt to regulate agriculture as an attempt to change their livelihoods, for better or worse.⁵⁸ However, these organizations have designed programs in order to raise awareness on how both sides need each other and how their actions have a direct and meaningful impact on each other.⁵⁹ Though these organizations continue to strive to represent producers in the political process, they face opposition from similar, but smaller, groups that support only specific segments of the industry.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, instead of making large strides to benefit more farmers, these smaller groups fighting with the larger ones only cause the average producer to have even less trust in the political processes representing them.⁶¹

In summary, agriculture in the United States causes a divide, in some form, in almost every political way. Agriculture is a polarizing point for politicians on either side of the political aisle when deciding how to regulate and manage the country's food system, just as it is between those same politicians and the people whose decisions affect at the ground level.

54. *Id.*

55. Chelsea N. Kaufman, *The Changing Political Character of American Farmers: 1954–2008*, 47 J. RURAL STUD. 153, 153 (2016).

56. Mike Tomko, *Farm Bureau Ensures Farmers' Voices to be Heard in New Administration*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED'N: IN THE NEWS (Nov. 9, 2020), <https://www.fb.org/in-the-news/farm-bureau-ensures-farmers-8217-voices-to-be-heard-in-new-administration>; see *About NFU*, NAT'L FARMERS UNION, <https://nfu.org/about/> (last visited Nov. 2, 2023).

57. Katherine L. Gronewold et al., *Farmers' Cynicism Toward Nature and Distrust of the Government: Where Does That Leave Conservation Buffer Programs?*, 11 APPLIED ENV'T EDUC. & COMM'N 18, 19 (2012).

58. Erin Benoy, *Wanted: Farmer-Friendly Climate Change Legislation*, 16 DRAKE J. AGRIC. L. 147, 149 (2011).

59. *Grassroots & Political Advocacy*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED'N, <https://www.fb.org/advocacy/grassroots-and-political-advocacy> (last visited Nov. 2, 2023).

60. Madison McVan, *American Farm Bureau Federation Claims It's the 'Voice of Agriculture.' Others Beg to Differ*, MO. INDEP. (Feb. 15, 2022, 5:55 AM), <https://missouriindependent.com/2022/02/15/american-farm-bureau-federation-claims-its-the-voice-of-agriculture-others-beg-to-differ/>.

61. *Id.*

III. SOCIAL POLARIZATION AND AGRICULTURE

American society has slowly transitioned from its agrarian roots, where most of society was engaged in agriculture, into a solely consumer role. While farmers are granted a higher degree of public trust than many other groups,⁶² they still face challenges with groups who seek to villainize them for trying to feed the nation and how they go about doing it.⁶³ These groups seek to undermine agricultural production and grow an unnecessary divide between farmers and the general public by trying to grow skepticism for agricultural practices and introducing alternative food sources.⁶⁴

A. The Polarization Surrounding Climate Change

Climate change is an issue that some have labeled “the most pressing environmental challenge of our time.”⁶⁵ Though this issue is one on a global scale, it finds itself deeply intertwined with agricultural production in the United States.⁶⁶ Greenhouse gasses, including methane, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide, are unfortunate byproducts of agricultural production in the country.⁶⁷ While climate change is a problem that farmers see firsthand more than most due to the biological nature of their work, they are also one of the most blamed groups for it by society today,⁶⁸ even though they only contribute around eleven percent of the nation’s total emissions of greenhouse gasses.⁶⁹ However, many in society overlook the bottom line. When farmers’ carbon-absorbing practices are entered into the equation of total greenhouse gasses emitted by agricultural practices, the number is actually negative two percent.⁷⁰ Across the country, plant-producing farmers implement carbon-capturing methods of agriculture such as no-till, reduced tillage, nutrient management, and planting cover crops as green fertilizer; yet, most of society does not appreciate the efforts they are making to reduce their carbon emissions.⁷¹ Animal producers

62. Terri Moore, *Public Attitudes about Farmers and Farming: A Golden Opportunity*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED’N: FOCUS ON AGRIC. (Jan. 15, 2020), <https://www.fb.org/focus-on-agriculture/public-attitudes-about-farmers-and-farming-a-golden-opportunity>.

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. See Benoy, *supra* note 58, at 147 (quoting *Massachusetts v. EPA*, 549 U.S. 497, 505 (2007)).

66. *See id.*

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.* at 148–49.

69. Georgina Gustin, *As Emissions From Agriculture Rise and Climate Change Batters American Farms, Congress Tackles the Farm Bill*, INSIDE CLIMATE NEWS (Mar. 1, 2023), <https://insideclimate-news.org/news/01032023/farm-bill-climate-change/>.

70. *Carbon Emissions*, DOWN TO EARTH: AGRIC. SUSTAINS ALA., <https://www.downtoearth.com/carbon-emissions> (last visited Nov. 2, 2023).

71. *Id.*

are also making strides to reduce their emissions. Since the 1960s, chicken farmers have reduced their greenhouse gas emissions by thirty-six percent and beef producers have reduced theirs by more than forty percent, all the while increasing production efficiency by over sixty-six percent per animal.⁷² With farmers at the forefront of contributions to combat climate change, many wonder why they are still vilified as the main impetus behind it all.⁷³

Many in the agricultural community believe the reason that farmers are blamed for climate change is because they are an easy scapegoat for those who view the quick statistics and do not see what is actually happening in the fields.⁷⁴ Climate change is a complex issue that is difficult for members of the general public to fully comprehend, due to the intricacies of its impacts and effects.⁷⁵ This public misunderstanding of climate change and farmers' roles in its cause is one of the biggest hurdles facing farmers and legislators trying to implement positive policy changes surrounding agriculture and climate change initiatives.⁷⁶ Although climate change will likely continue to be a politically divisive topic, scientists now realize that the agricultural industry sits in a key position to mitigate climate change.⁷⁷ Modern studies and improvements in carbon sequestration now lead many scientists and agricultural researchers to focus on using agricultural production as a carbon sink to combat climate change caused by other industries, as well as agriculture's own emissions.⁷⁸ Companies known as mitigation banks try to combat climate change by bridging the gap between farmers and environmentalists through the conversion of unproductive lands into restored areas.⁷⁹ They do this by using different conservation easements and providing the general public with opportunities to work with farmers to conduct climate conscious agriculture.⁸⁰ Through new information and programs available to farmers and the public surrounding climate change, farmers may stop being blamed for climate change.

72. *Id.*

73. Todd Edwards & Matt Russell, *Earth Friendly Agriculture for Soil, Water, and Climate: A Multijurisdictional Cooperative Approach*, 21 *DRAKE J. AGRIC. L.* 325, 345–46 (2016).

74. Erin Fitzgerald, *Opinion: The Climate Blame Game*, *AGRI PULSE* (Apr. 22, 2022, 10:44 AM), <https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/17577-opinion-the-climate-blame-game>.

75. J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr. et al., *Understanding Farmer Perspectives on Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation: The Roles of Trust in Sources of Climate Information, Climate Change Beliefs, and Perceived Risk*, 47 *ENV'T & BEHAV.* 205, 207 (2015).

76. *Id.*

77. Alexia Brunet Marks, *(Carbon) Farming Our Way Out of Climate Change*, 97 *DENV. L. REV.* 497, 499 (2020).

78. Peter Lehner & Nathan A. Rosenberg, *Legal Pathways to Carbon-Neutral Agriculture*, 47 *ENV'T L. REP.* 10845, 10848 (2017).

79. *Will Amoroso*, *ECO TERRA*, <https://ecoterra.com/people/> (last visited Jan. 18, 2024).

80. *Company Profile*, *ECO TERRA*, <https://ecoterra.com/profile/> (last visited Nov. 2, 2023).

B. The Polarization Surrounding Meat Alternatives

While meat-free diets have been pushed for over half a century,⁸¹ a more recent trend in the meat-free movement is creating a large divide between farmers and society and even within members of society who are not involved in agricultural production. Beginning in the late 2010s, plant-based and cell-based alternatives to actual meat began to be marketed to the public.⁸² These alternatives are not just replacements for meat, such as tofu, but are made to try to fake the visual appearance, texture, and taste of real animal meat.⁸³ These products are marketed to consumers as a way of eating that “take[s] ethics off the table” and a way to “save the planet.”⁸⁴ The companies engineering these products wish to market their products as “meat,” which is contrary to the longstanding notion and Federal Meat Inspection Act definition that meat is derived from animals.⁸⁵ Understandably, the growth of plant and cell-based meat alternatives has American animal producers upset and worried that the alternatives will soon compete with their products at the consumer level.⁸⁶ Groups such as the U.S. Cattlemen’s Association have petitioned the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service to limit the use of “meat” and “beef” to only labels of animals born and raised in accordance with traditional agricultural practices.⁸⁷ This limit on meat alternatives is especially important to animal producers, because meat alternatives have been labeled one of the largest factors threatening the domestic cattle industry.⁸⁸

In response to the growing concerns of farmers and consumers, many states have passed legislation protecting both producers and consumers from having plant-based and cell-cultured products labeled as meat on the shelves of stores.⁸⁹ This is especially important given some of the alternatives were labeled with names such

81. See VITALE, *supra* note 27, at 6-7.

82. Nicole E. Negowetti, *Taking (Animal-Based) Meat and Ethics off the Table: Food Labeling and the Role of Consumers as Agents of Food Systems Change*, 99 OR. L. REV. 91, 94 (2020).

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.* (quoting GOOD FOOD INST., GFI OUTCOMES: WHY GFI IS A SUPERB PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENT 2 (2017), <https://animalcharityevaluators.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/gfi-outcomes-why-gfi-is-a-superb-philanthropic-investment-10-01-17.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/36BC-VREU>]).

85. *Id.* at 118.

86. *See id.* at 120.

87. *Id.*

88. Terence P. Stewart et al., *Trade and Cattle: How the System is Failing an Industry in Crisis*, 9 MINN. J. GLOB. TRADE 449, 486 (2000).

89. See *Meat Labeling Bill Wins Final Passage*, ALA. FARMERS FED’N: ALFA (May 24, 2019), <https://alfafarmers.org/meat-labeling-bill-wins-final-passage>; see also Elaine Watson, *Plant-Based and Cell-Cultured ‘Meat’ Labeling Under Attack in 25 States*, FOODNAVIGATOR-USA (July 29, 2019, 8:34 AM), <https://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Article/2019/05/29/Plant-based-and-cell-cultured-meat-labeling-under-attack-in-25-states#>.

as “Vegan Chik’n Tenders” or “Beyond Beef,” in an attempt to make the products appear as if they are true substitutes to real meat products.⁹⁰ The United States has established one of the most reliable food safety systems in the world, and it is important for consumers to know that these alternatives are not the same as labeling food as “organic” or “non-GMO” in order to not tarnish the safe and trustworthy reputation that has been earned.⁹¹ Instead, these products aim to replace traditional animal farming practices with highly-processed plant alternatives or cell-cultured products that are grown in mediums placed in bioreactors.⁹² With all the varying information in marketing campaigns and labeling, consumer rights groups, agricultural producers’ legislative groups, meat-alternative company lobbyists, and regulatory agencies will continue to face a challenge in agreeing on how to handle the continuing saga of this issue.⁹³

To summarize, the nature of agriculture and the advancements within the industry have led to major, divisive social issues. Climate change is not a new issue, but new information presents challenges in how to implement positive change without making farmers feel they are being attacked. The issue of meat alternatives is a newer matter that will likely be a hotbed for debate for the foreseeable future.

IV. THE EFFECTS OF AGRICULTURE’S POLARIZATION ON PRODUCERS

Due to the polarization of agriculture, many on either side of the conflicts neglect to look at the resulting effects on the other side. This is especially true for agricultural producers who face a unique set of challenges that many seem to forget when consuming the very food farmers labored to produce. In America, the expansion of major cities and growth of urban areas have left the social issues surrounding agriculture and rural life to receive minor consideration in comparison to those of more populated areas.⁹⁴ The fact that farmers make up a significantly lower percentage of the nation’s workforce should not mean that farmers receive diminished consideration in terms of social issues; instead, it adds to the importance of this smaller number of individuals.⁹⁵

90. See Watson, *supra* note 89.

91. Christy Wyatt, *Where’s the Meat? A Constitutional Analysis of Arkansas’ Law Prohibiting the Use of “Meat” Terms on Plant – and Cell – Based Products*, 89 U. CIN. L. REV. 731, 734–35 (2021).

92. *Id.*

93. Shareefah Taylor, *Meat Wars: The Unsettled Intersection of Federal and State Food Labeling Regulations for Plant-Based Meat Alternatives*, 15 U. MASS. L. REV. 269, 271–72 (2020); Mike Tomko & Bailey Corwine, *Families Deserve Truth in Food Labeling*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED’N: NEWS RELEASE (Apr. 24, 2023), <https://www.fb.org/news-release/families-deserve-truth-in-food-labeling>.

94. See Butterfield, *supra* note 31, at 606.

95. *Id.* at 608–09.

A. Social Stigma of Agriculture in Young Americans

In the minds of the general public, life on the farm is a peaceful, wholesome, and happy life that is a step back to the old days where they face few of the struggles the rest of modern society faces, but this could not be farther from the truth.⁹⁶ Like many industrial workers, producers face problems arising from technology replacing human labor jobs, trade wars, market price instability, and corporate monopolization.⁹⁷ However, they also face a set of challenges that are especially worrisome in their industry.

The reality of farming is that it is an extremely demanding profession from a work-and-time standpoint and makes very few farmers rich. This high time investment for little payoff causes many people in today's generation to move away from farming as a profession and does not attract future generations frequently.⁹⁸ Many young people already face concerns about financial stability in their future, and they do not want to exponentially grow that risk by joining a profession filled with economic distress.⁹⁹ This move away from farming has resulted in a growing age gap in the agriculture industry, with a six-to-one ratio of farmers over 65 to farmers under 35 as of 2011.¹⁰⁰ This lack of future farmers creates a major concern for aging farmers who worry about who will farm their land in the future and who will feed future generations of Americans.¹⁰¹

The stigma surrounding farming in the public eye may also result from a negative perception based on comments made by public figures or how farmers are depicted in the media.¹⁰² This was evident when a Democrat presidential candidate in the 2016 election called the Republican candidate's supporters "a basket of deplorables."¹⁰³ Many farmers who supported the Republican candidate felt this was a personal attack on all blue collar workers, such as themselves, and further felt isolated from the general public by the lack of outcry from that candidate's supporters

96. Alana Semuels, *'They're Trying to Wipe Us Off the Map.'* *Small American Farmers Are Nearing Extinction*, TIME (Nov. 27, 2019, 1:16 PM), <https://time.com/5736789/small-american-farmers-debt-crisis-extinction/>.

97. *Id.*

98. Tyler Slack, *Bridging the Gap: Farm Transition Challenges Facing Elder Farmers and the Need for a Nationwide Farm-On Program*, 20 ELDER L.J. 485, 488–91 (2013).

99. Karin R. Zeigler, *Who Will Teach Our Farmers: Learning the Value of Mentor Programs from State and Private Programs*, 5 DRAKE J. AGRIC. L. 279, 280 (2000).

100. *See* Slack, *supra* note 98, at 486.

101. *Id.* at 487.

102. *See* John Vogel, *3 Big Reasons Why Clinton Lost. Did Washington Get the Message?*, FARM PROGRESS (Nov. 10, 2016), <https://www.farmprogress.com/commentary/3-big-reasons-why-clinton-lost-did-washington-get-the-message->.

103. *Id.*

in urban areas.¹⁰⁴ However, it is not only politicians who attack farmers in the public sphere.¹⁰⁵ Movie stars, professional athletes, and other celebrities push an incorrect narrative that farming is evil through destruction of the environment and animal cruelty.¹⁰⁶ Luckily for farmers, there are a few young people and organizations with a passion for agriculture who are using their knowledge to push back against these accusations and promote the agricultural industry in a positive light on their platforms.¹⁰⁷ However, these actions to push back against the narrative are not easy as public discourse against farming continues to grow.¹⁰⁸ As farmers persist in fighting the stigma surrounding their way of life, they face a growing challenge in an age where people are so separated from the source of their food.¹⁰⁹

B. The Mental Health Crisis in Rural America

Not only does the public overlook the tangible problems farmers face, but they also overlook the burgeoning mental health crisis impacting farmers too. Suicide rates are on the rise among all age groups in the nation, but the rate among those working in the agricultural industry is double that of the general occupational rate.¹¹⁰ This increased suicide rate may be due to farmers losing their homes and families' generational land when they face financial trouble, instead of merely losing a job.¹¹¹ It also can be attributed to the fact that for many, they are at their place of work even when they are at home.¹¹² America has made great improvements in the realm of identifying and treating mental health problems, and many in urban areas receive the benefits of these improvements.¹¹³ However, this progress seems

104. *See id.*

105. Shelby Fichter, *Media and Agriculture: Fighting the Stigma*, TIGERLILY, <https://web.cobleskill.edu/tigerlily/2021/05/story-11/> (last visited Nov. 3, 2023).

106. *Id.*

107. *Id.*; Jack Gjesvold (@timber.solutions), INSTAGRAM (Aug. 4, 2023), https://www.instagram.com/p/CvhVX92uWM_/?igsh=MTU0YjZ3M2thbnR0cw%3D%3D.

108. *See* Curt Arens, *What Does Mainstream Media Think About Farmers?*, FARMPROGRESS (Feb. 11, 2013), <https://www.farmprogress.com/commentary/what-does-mainstream-media-think-about-farmers-> (highlighting the media blowback from RAM Trucks' "So God Made a Farmer" Super Bowl commercial as a tribute to farmers).

109. *See id.*

110. Deborah B. Reed & Deborah T. Claunch, *Risk for Depressive Symptoms and Suicide Among U.S. Primary Farmers and Family Members: A Systematic Literature Review*, 68 WORKPLACE HEALTH & SAFETY 236, 236 (2020).

111. *See* Semuels, *supra* note 96.

112. Marlee Moore, *Breaking Point: Mental Health Battle Real on Alabama Farms*, ALA. FARMERS FED'N: ALFA (Sept. 3, 2020), <https://alfafarmers.org/breaking-point-mental-health-battle-real-on-alabama-farms/>.

113. Alexxa Blair, "I'm Fine": *Resolving the Farmer Mental Health Crisis in Rural America Through Policy Initiatives*, 27 DRAKE J. AGRIC. L. 257, 258 (2022).

to have marginalized the nation's agricultural producers.¹¹⁴ Due to the agricultural production process, farmers face many physical and social stressors unique to their profession, such as volatile weather and working with family, on top of the stressors that the general public faces.¹¹⁵ These struggles, coupled with the traditional stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health, are troubling considering the aging farming population. More than forty percent of farmers polled shared their reluctance to seek out help and stated they "would perceive themselves as weak if they thought they had a mental illness."¹¹⁶

With mental health issues seemingly growing to extreme proportions among the agricultural community, some advocates for farming are pushing for positive change to combat the crisis. Congress introduced numerous pieces of legislation through the 2010s to create farmer-specific mental health resources, but sadly, attempts for federal action fizzled out in many cases.¹¹⁷ Next up were farmer advocate groups. The American Farm Bureau Federation implemented a website named "Farm State of Mind."¹¹⁸ This website allows producers access to mental health professionals, tips for helping others with mental health struggles, and provides other mental health resources for agricultural producers by giving them a venue that addresses the specific needs of their occupation and way of life.¹¹⁹ The goal of these resources is to help inform farmers that reaching out for help does not reduce their strength and independence.¹²⁰ Programs, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, and policy changes must be enacted in order to preserve the health of the country's backbone by changing their perceptions of mental health and improving the availability of resources in the rural areas that farmers call home.¹²¹

These issues currently plague the individuals who feed not just the United States, but the entire planet. Therefore, serious action must be taken to address these issues and to benefit farmers hurt the most, in order to maintain their way of life. Changing the social stigma surrounding farming is not an easy hurdle, but it is one

114. *Id.*

115. *See* Reed & Claunch, *supra* note 110.

116. *Stigma Still Surrounds Mental Health, Iowa Farmers Say*, SUCCESSFUL FARMING (Dec. 17, 2021), <https://www.agriculture.com/family/health-safety/stigma-still-surrounds-mental-health-iowa-farmers-say>.

117. *See* Blair, *supra* note 113, at 262–64.

118. Garrett Hawkins, *Farmers Focus on Mental Health*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED'N: FOCUS ON AGRIC. (July 7, 2021), <https://www.fb.org/focus-on-agriculture/farmers-focus-on-mental-health>; *see Farm State of Mind*, AM. FARM BUREAU FED'N, <https://www.fb.org/initiative/farm-state-of-mind> (last visited Nov. 3, 2023); *see* Moore, *supra* note 112.

119. Hawkins, *supra* note 118; *see Farm State of Mind*, *supra* note 118; *see also* Moore, *supra* note 112.

120. *See* Hawkins, *supra* note 118.

121. *See* Blair, *supra* note 113, at 272.

that many individuals with platforms reaching larger audiences must consider taking. The mental health crisis in agriculture and rural America deserves the attention of professionals and politicians who seek to genuinely help the individuals they represent.

V. CONCLUSION

The polarization surrounding agriculture presents itself in many ways. This divide is not a new occurrence, and it is one that will continue to plague an industry that is essential to everyone in society. The negative effects of polarization can be remedied through public action. While politicians will always have their own motives for passing legislation, agricultural issues should be approached with an open mind for the benefits it produces and the rewards that policy can have on it. With society advancing exponentially each day, the general public must try to better understand farmers and work with them to create a better future. If positive changes are made regarding the political and social polarization of agriculture, the negative effects can be minimized to provide farmers with the resources and support they need to continue feeding future generations to come.

