

Farmers are mobilizing for action. It's not the first time.

Last week's rally of farmers for climate action harks back to previous "tractorcades" and farmer activism



Perspective by Michael Stewart Foley

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Last week, hundreds of farmers and their allies came to Washington to take part in a three-day mobilization called "Farmers for Climate Action: A Rally for Resilience." This broad coalition of farm groups held a spirited rally and march to demand support for farmer-led climate solutions, racial justice and the prioritization of communities over corporations in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Such activism has a long history. Dating to the founding of the Grange in the 1870s, farmers have organized when faced with threats to their lives and livelihood. This was especially the case in the 1970s, when a family farm movement famously mobilized in "tractorcades" at the Capitol to try to prevent farm foreclosures and keep farmers on the land. The diverse coalition of farm, food, climate and social justice groups that gathered last week differs in important ways from the White, male-led farm movement organizations of the past. But like those farmers from nearly 50 years ago, they are mobilizing out of a sense of outrage and a near-desperate sense that forces beyond their control, along with governmental indifference and wrongheaded policies, are pushing farms and food systems to the brink.

When farmers came to Washington during the farm crisis of the 1970s and '80s, they felt like the government had set them up to fail. On the surface, farmers were thriving compared to most other Americans suffering through the "stagflation" years of high unemployment and runaway inflation that began in 1973. Global grain shortages and demand from foreign governments drove the price of American wheat to historic highs, promising to boost farm profits. Concerned that demand might actually outstrip supply, the Nixon administration told farmers to plant "fence post to fence post" and fashioned policies to spur further investment in agriculture. American farmers prepared to "feed the world" by expanding their operations, mostly with money borrowed from banks happy to lend to them amid such rosy grain price forecasts.

But by the late 1970s, thanks to fence-post-to-fence-post production and the encroachment of foreign competition, demand for grain slackened. Soon, prices did too. By the end of the decade, the average farm income declined by 25 percent. By the mid-1980s, family farm earnings had dropped by an astonishing 83 percent, from about \$35,000 to \$6,000 on average. On the other hand, as inflation caused land values to climb, farm wealth appeared on paper to grow substantially. But in reality, the grain price crisis meant that many farmers who relied on cash flow for production did not have what they needed to make ends meet.

At first, many farmers simply borrowed money to stay afloat — banks and lending agencies were happy to oblige. But when the Federal Reserve Bank moved to slow inflation by restricting the monetary supply and allowing interest rates to climb, land values — on which those loans were based — spiraled downward.

Many farmers were suddenly carrying more debt than they and their land were worth and had no way to make it up. Massive waves of foreclosures followed, and rural communities across the Midwest began to experience hard times reminiscent of the Great Depression. Farmers went from confused to angry. One captured the sentiment of thousands: “There’s a lot of people feeling abused by the system.” Despite their productivity, despite following government guidance, American farmers could not get a reasonable price for their products. Government policy, farmers charged, could be summed up as “cheap food policy,” which they saw as privileging consumers over producers.

In protest, farmers in the American Agriculture Movement drove their tractors out of the fields and into the streets. In 1978, more than 3,000 farmers from all over the country descended by tractor on Washington in the first national “tractorcade” — traveling at only 15 miles per hour, some needed nearly 20 days to get there — to demand legislation from Congress that would guarantee farm viability by lifting farm prices. Throughout the winter and into the spring, farmers roamed the halls of the House and Senate office buildings, stalking representatives and lobbying for a bill.

Such protests garnered media attention as farmers staged rallies, drove their tractors and positioned “broad-shouldered and heavysset farmers” at visible locations to distribute literature and catch the television cameras’ eye. In one widely covered move, a group of farmers released goats that crowded the steps of the Capitol building.

Although the farmers found receptive listeners in Congress, the Council on Wage and Price Stability — the executive branch office charged with restraining inflation — declared that any policies aimed at improving the prices farmers would get for their goods would spike national inflation. Farmers came under attack on editorial pages for being a “narrow-interest” constituency, focused only on their own bottom line, unconcerned with the economic struggles of their fellow citizens. Congress did pass an emergency assistance act that increased price supports by 11 percent and extended credit to farmers in jeopardy of losing their farms, but the protesters viewed the act as a Band-Aid when a tourniquet was needed.

In early 1979, the American Agriculture Movement returned to Washington, this time with some 3,500 farmers from all over the country, driving tractors, pickup trucks and motor homes. Intent on creating even more problems for legislators slow to act, they deliberately blocked traffic, drove onto the National Mall and into the Reflecting Pool, and threw a goat over the fence at the White House. When The Washington Post criticized their actions, 100 farmers drove their tractors to the paper’s local offices and burned stacks of The Post on the sidewalk, further damaging the movement’s public image.

In short, the tractorcades brought attention to the plight of family farmers, but did not win the level of public and congressional support that farmers wanted. And the situation has only gotten worse over the years. While public attitudes have shifted back to supporting family farmers, a reality visible in the celebrated Farm Aid Concerts launched in 1985 by Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp and Neil Young, farming has become increasingly concentrated and industrialized, to the detriment of independent farmers. Adding to the problem, consumers confront increasingly limited options in where they can buy food, so buying from a dollar store or Target is sometimes easier and cheaper than purchasing from a farmers market.

Just as significantly are the issues of climate change and racial justice, which have created a modern farm movement pushing to undo environmental and social damages caused by industrial scale agriculture. By employing “regenerative” agriculture practices — planting cover crops, using rotational grazing methods, and otherwise regenerating soil so that it draws carbon out of the atmosphere — farmers may yet lead the way in reversing climate change. Hence, we see a renewed sense of urgency, coming in the form of a new coalition that is both continuing and updating historical fights in response to changes in our planet and in our politics.