



# A small Iowa farmer's perspective on COVID-19

Denise O'Brien<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 24 April 2020  
© Springer Nature B.V. 2020, corrected publication [December/2020]

Every morning I wake up like thousands of others wondering if what I am experiencing is just a bad dream. As I move into the day I am acutely aware that it is not a bad dream and that I as a farmer and an activist have a responsibility to make this devastating situation better.

I am grateful every day that I am a small organic vegetable farmer; that I have a purpose in life and that I have the resources to grow healthy nutritious food. Through the initial days of the pandemic I listened everyday to the news and read the headlines and articles to make sense of the crisis. I joined in multiple conference calls and video discussions trying to understand what is going on and how I can use my farmer status as a remedy.

As the pandemic continues to unfold it has become apparent to me how vulnerable our food system is. I am in Iowa—a place I often refer to as the belly of the beast, when it comes to describing industrial agri-business. My farm is surrounded by fields of dirt that is mined to produce bushels and bushels of corn and soybeans to feed the livestock and ethanol industry. The natural resource that has been provided us over centuries of formation has been turned into a factory to produce corn that has little nutritional value.

Many Iowans are proud that the state is number one in hogs, eggs, corn and soy production but very few people stop to ask at what cost. The cost is now catching up with us. The hotspots for COVID-19 are the industrial factories that

process the pork for millions to eat. The factory workers are people of color and a high percentage are immigrants from many nations. The workers have been deemed essential and report for work every day in plants that, according to news stories and first hand reports, have done very little to provide a safe environment in which to work. The cases of COVID-19 have increased where the factories are located. The state of Iowa and the plant owners have threatened the lives of the very people they rely on to keep the plants profitable. The message is clear the people are essential but replaceable.

The vulnerability of the industrial scale of agri-business has become very apparent. An industry that relies on low wages, harsh working conditions and long hours has been dreadfully exposed. Hogs continue to grow and mature leaving the caretakers of the hogs with animals that are too large to fit the streamlined system. A system set up for efficiently churning out a product that in a pandemic has failed both the grower and the worker.

There is an upside to the exposure of the vulnerability of the industrial system. Many people are turning to local farmers that produce fruits and vegetables and animals on a small or medium size scale. CSAs are full to overflowing with people buying shares. This presents an opportunity to us as small farmers. We can continue to educate on the importance of local/regional food production and raise awareness of the devastation of an industrial agri-business has on our environment and our communities. We must undo federal policy that has given us cheap food and capture the true value of agriculture to the environment and to the people.

---

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

---

The article A small Iowa farmer's perspective on COVID-19, written by Denise O'Brien, was originally published electronically on the publisher's internet portal (currently SpringerLink) on 14 May 2020 with open access. With the author(s)' decision to step back from Open Choice, the copy-right of the article changed December/2020 to © Springer Nature B.V. 2020 and the article is forthwith distributed under the terms of copyright.

---

✉ Denise O'Brien  
denise@wfan.org

<sup>1</sup> Ames, IA, USA

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Denise O'Brien** is a farmer and community volunteer from Atlantic, Iowa. She has farmed with her husband, Larry Harris, for 44 years. She is a wife, mother and grandmother. Denise and Larry maintain seventeen acres of the original Harris farm, 5 of which are in certified organic fruit and vegetable production incorporating high tunnel production. O'Brien also raises turkeys and chickens for meat and egg production. Their business, Rolling Acres Farm is a Community Supported Agriculture Farm (CSA); members pay a fee to have fresh produce delivered for twenty weeks during the growing season. Denise loves the physical and mental challenge that organic vegetable production offers her aging body. By farming, Denise has had numerous opportunities to work within the agricultural community by working on policy development on the state, national and international level and becoming involved in the community of local food systems and conservation

issues. Throughout her farming career, Denise has been involved in her community as well as in the agricultural sector. She is the co-founder of Women Food and Agriculture Network. She currently serves as Chair of the Board of Directors for Pesticide Action Network of North America. Denise also helped found and served on the board of Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, an organization that uses easements to preserve land for food production in Iowa. O'Brien served as an Agriculture Advisor in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2012 and used that experience to deepen her knowledge of women farmers on an international level. Denise has received numerous awards for her community achievements and accomplishments and was inducted into Iowa's Women's Hall of Fame in 2000. She has run for numerous public offices from school board to the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture in 2006 to running for the Iowa Legislature in 2018. Never winning but always willing to step forward!