

# NO FARMERS FOOD

By Dr. Chip Hinton

**F**lorida is an intriguing place to live. Every county in the state has its own personality. If Florida was personified, Duval and Escambia would be the hands, Alachua would be the head, Monroe would be the feet, and Imperial Polk would be the heart.

Roots in the Polk community run deep. Locals seem to be more closely associated with the land and are resistant to outside influences from the hordes eager to choke out the native beauty of a quieter, more serene lifestyle. Agriculture in Polk County is one of tradition, and it comes as no surprise that the county's agricultural claims to fame revolve around citrus and cattle.

If Florida agriculture has royalty, it is through the birthright of citrus and cattle. Cattle once outnumbered settlers throughout the flatwoods of central Florida. Legend firmly credits the name of "Florida Cracker" from the sound of our cowboys' whips as cowboys herded cattle. With over 2000 square miles from border to sprawling border, there was a lot of room for 100,000 cows to ramble.

There was also a lot of room for oranges. At one time, Polk County produced over half of the nation's citrus. Even today, Florida means citrus, but Polk is the heart of citrus. Life revolved around the harvest cycle. The air was sweet during the bloom; air was heavy during juicing; air was brown during a freeze.

How many youngsters grew up in the groves, hunting rabbits, or learning life through inquisitive eyes? Trips to town meant long rides down narrow roads in a pickup truck, with nothing but rolling hills of groves from horizon to horizon.

There were no bumper stickers on those old pickup trucks. A "No Farmers, No Food" sticker would be stating the obvious. Just about everyone made a living either from agriculture or the mines. And even the mines provided the phosphorus for people around the world to grow crops. Who would ever question the linkage between farmers and food?

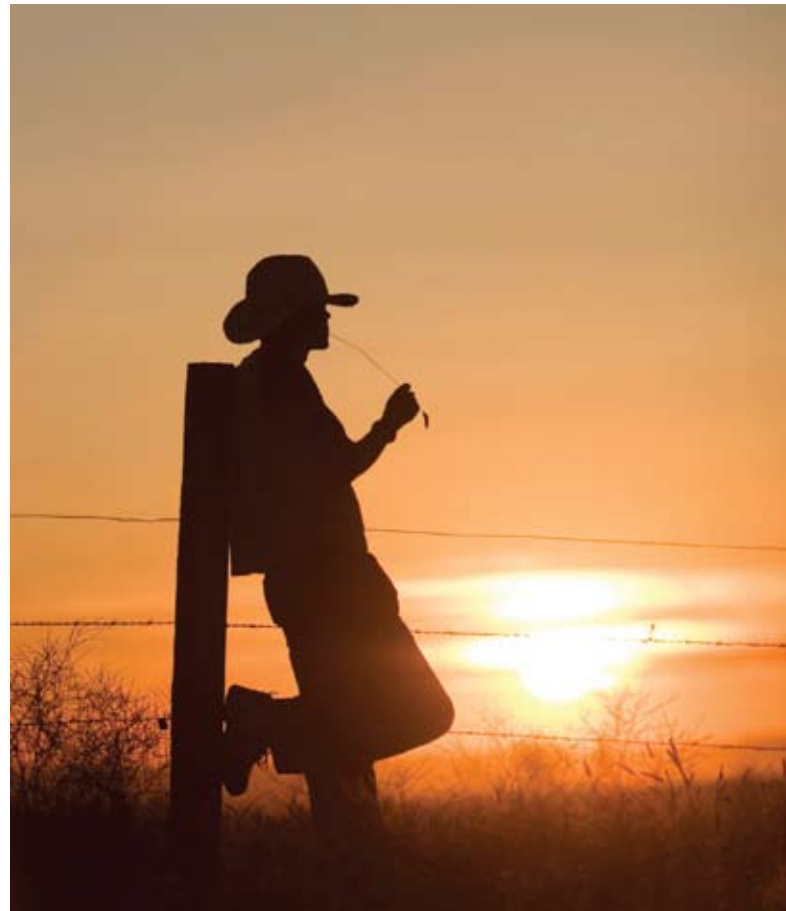
It is ironic that the first jolt of reality came from Publix, with corporate offices in Lakeland. It wasn't happenstance that the infamous commercial "Where does milk come from?" appeared and almost immediately the "No Farmers, No Food" slogan began to appear on bumpers throughout the state.

The bumper sticker became the polite correction for the little boy who answered the question wrongly that milk came from Publix. The resounding answer by agriculture was that milk comes from cows. It comes from cows cared for by dairy farmers. If you

don't have farmers, you don't "Got Milk!"

Over the years, the four-word slogan has become a farmer's battle cry for understanding by those away from the farm. Since very few politicians or regulators had roots in a farm, the slogan stood as a reminder that farming filled the most basic of needs, and without farmers, without food, there would be no need for doctors, lawyers, politicians or regulators.

Just as the dairy industry became the focal point for the Publix faux pas, the dairy industry in Florida has become the poster child for the realities behind the slogan. In Okeechobee County, a precipitous loss of dairies due to environmental regulations and a one-time Federal cow retirement program resulted in a local unemployment spike reaching 38 percent in the months that followed the great cowntastrophe.



In this case, “No Farmers” meant “No Food,” No Jobs” and also “No Moola!” So far, mid-west dairy farmers have picked up the slack (at a price), but unless there is a change in attitude as to what is realistic for farmers to invest in non-productive aspects of farming, we could be facing a future crisis in homeland security. Pity the country that relies on others for their food.

For farmers to survive, there must be a basic understanding by non-farmers on certain facts. First and foremost, farming is a business. It is not green space offered to non-farmers to improve the quality of life. Open space is a characteristic of agricultural land and there are environmental benefits to the community if land is kept in agriculture, but the two are not synonymous. The best way to insure that there will be farmers (and open space) in the future is to make farming profitable. In addition to environmental considerations, it is in the best interest of non-farmers to support profitable farming because agriculture is a strong economic engine for the entire community.

Second, (and this fact is hard for non-landowners to understand), every regulation costs someone, something. The converse to this fact is also important ... those who benefit from a regulation, should be willing to pay a fair portion of the cost of that regulation. The future of agriculture rests upon the ability of farmers to identify urban bias in regulations and reduce the cost of those regulations while still meeting the intent. It can be done, but it requires farmers to get involved in issues outside their fence posts.

Personally, I’m optimistic about the future of farming in Imperial Polk County. It goes back to the bumper sticker “No Farmers, No Food!”

As long as there are people, there will be a need for food. More people will need more food. Polk County is uniquely positioned because of geography and climate to exploit niche markets unavailable to most other farmers. More importantly, farmers have faith in themselves, researchers and industry representatives to solve the problems of today and the future as they arise.

In Polk County, there is another reason for optimism. Unlike most prime agricultural counties, Imperial Polk has a bumper crop of state and federal legislators that know agriculture and respect the critical link between viable agriculture and a prosperous community.

Together they are an unbeatable coalition. Farmers may complain or wonder out loud how they are going to keep farming. But they are still tough as rawhide. Deep down inside, farmers know they will find a way to keep on, keeping on. To give up would be a fulfillment of the slogan. They just can’t let that happen.

