As in India, US Farmers Caught in Crushing Agribusiness Debt Trap Turn to Suicide in Spiking Numbers

With Bayer-Monsanto now the largest seed and agrochemical company in the world, its near monopoly on prices and its disregard for farmers and environmental health mean that the despair that has consumed India's farmers will soon be planted in the United States.

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Over a decade ago, a disturbing trend among farmers in India captured headlines, as suicides among Indian farmers began to spiral out of control. Many of those farmers were indebted to giant agribusiness corporations like Monsanto, which – after gaining access to India's seed sector in 1998 – enticed poor farmers to buy new "bioengineered" seeds every planting season along with the associated agro-chemicals required to grow them, promising bigger yields that would offset the costs.

When such benefits failed to materialize, many farmers – confronted with an ever-growing debt snowball – were faced with losing their land, leading many to take their lives by drinking the very same agro-chemicals that had helped trap them in debt. Though it has faded from the headlines, the crisis has continued unabated, with over 12,000 farmers in India still committing suicide every year.

While the crisis in India may seem a distant problem to many Americans, new reports have indicated that the U.S. is developing a farmer-suicide epidemic of its own.

A new report in *CBS News* notes that farmers in America now die at a rate higher than that of any other occupation and five times higher than that of the general population, even as the national suicide rate as a whole has jumped over the last few decades. As *CBS* notes, the increase in suicides mirrors a similar phenomenon in the 1980s, when U.S. farmers faced economic hardship related to debt, and suicides spiked.

Jennifer Fahy, communications director with Farm Aid, told *CBS* at the time that

> "the farm crisis was so bad, there was a terrible outbreak of suicide and depression."

Fahy now warns that the current situation is "actually worse."

The newly reported increase in U.S. farmer suicides — much like the crisis for India's farmers – is related to debt, specifically to global seed and agribusiness corporations that continue to raise prices as farmers' incomes fall. Farm income has been dropping steadily since 2013, with the average this year set to be 35 percent less than it was five years ago. Meanwhile, farmers have seen a 300 percent price increase in recent years on products like seeds, fertilizer and agro-chemicals produced by giant agribusiness corporations like Monsanto, Cargill, Syngenta and others.

Many farmers in the U.S. are dependent on "bioengineered" seeds and their requisite chemicals, molded by decades of U.S. policy that pushed for farm consolidation and favored the adoption of these products. As a result, most American farmers have become dependent on these commodities and, because they must be purchased again every planting season, have been taking out loans just to be able to plant.

As Todd Eney, a fourth-generation farmer in central Montana, told *Business Insider* last month:

> Our farm has been out here since 1935, and I'm 40 years old and I've watched a lot of small family farms in our area go under. They can't compete because they can't pay the price of input because of what these companies are wanting to charge for input now."

The growing debt burden has been known for some time, with reports warning five years ago that U.S. farmers would be the next group to "be slammed by debt." Yet now — in addition to the massive debt accumulated by many farmers — President Trump's trade and tariff war, as well as the Federal Reserve's raising of interest rates, have compounded to put even more financial pressure on the nation's farmers.

Bayer-Monsanto merger leaves American farmers fearing worst is yet to come

Unfortunately, the situation for American farmers is soon likely to get much worse, thanks to the merger of agribusiness giants Monsanto and Bayer, which concluded earlier this month. The resulting mega-company now controls around a third of the U.S. seed and pesticide market and has inspired the other largest agribusinesses in the world to plan mergers, including Dow Chemical and DuPont. After the merger was announced, many farmers voiced their concerns that it would allow Bayer-Monsanto to consolidate even more of the seed market and use its privileged position to further increase prices.

Beyond an imminent jump in prices for farmers, the merger affects farmers in yet another way, as their products, time and again, have been shown to cause mass die-offs of farmers' most important pollinator: bees. Many Bayer and Monsanto products have been found to harm bee populations, even in studies they themselves funded. As a result, over 340 native bee populations are facing extinction and over half of all bees in the U.S. are actively declining. With the bee population facing unprecedented die-offs, any worsening of their precarious situation will have a major impact on U.S. farms and, by extension, farmers.

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Whitney Webb is a staff writer for MintPress News and a contributor to Ben Swann's Truth in

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