

CLIMATE TALK

Farming, Floods, and the New Normal

Todd Rothe



This summer was a wet and wild ride on the weather roller coaster. The flood of 2016 was one for the record books and is sure to be harkened back on for decades to come. It was not only a great test of our community resolve and collaboration, but also a conditioning exercise to prepare for the next cycle of “weird weather” in this age of climate change.

My farm is nestled on the banks of the Marengo River just South of Ashland. Along with my wife and four children, we produce over 30 different types of vegetable crops, raise chickens for meat and eggs and a handful of pigs for an endless supply of bacon. We enjoy spending countless hours on the river swimming, canoeing, and just throwing sticks in the water for the dog to retrieve. Having a river in your back yard is like an animal. It can be calm and peaceful, or it can be ravaging and angry. It can sing a lullaby or keep you up at night with a thunderous torrent. The river can grow hungry at times and gobble up the landscape around you and then retract and become almost unassuming. For us the Marengo River has become the gauge with which we measure the significance of weather events within each season and passing year.

We purchased our farm in 2012. In talking with the local “old timers” it was common knowledge that one could expect the river to break its banks every 15 to 20 years or so. In fact, I remember a flood back in 1999 or 2000 that made all of the bridges upstream of Hwy 13 impassible. So, we mentally prepared ourselves to deal with the next flood on the horizon, thinking we wouldn’t have to worry about it again for quite some time after that, right? Well, to welcome us to the neighborhood, the Marengo flooded in mid-May 2013 after a three inch rain and 18 plus inches of snow only two weeks previous. The following May the river flooded again. We thought to ourselves, that’s crazy, two years in a row - that must be unheard of. Is this something we should expect more often?

March 16, 2016- the river breaks its banks, and again on June 5th. Then, the night of July 11, 2016- after ten inches of rain in less than eight hours the epic 70-year flood hit the area. The aftermath would be of historic proportions. For us that would be three floods in one year. In fact, that’s five flood events in the five years that we have lived here. Do we have really bad luck? Are we cursed? Or is this the new normal?

There are countless stories that we can hear from around the country and the globe about the ever-increasing effects of climate change on communities. From the flooding in Louisiana and wild fires in California to the typhoons in the Philippines and pavement- melting heat in India, people are having to normalize the wild shifts in weather patterns to adapt and survive- mentally and physically. This year is going down yet again as the hottest year on record globally. This will be the fourth year in a row that this has happened. To date, 15 of the 16 warmest years on record have occurred during the 21st

century. Warmer oceans equal erratic weather patterns and ramped up El Nino and El Nina events. As a farmer, I've come to expect the unexpected. From one season to the next, you can no longer count on a wet spring or a dry fall. And when the river floods, I consider it a normal annual event.

If you want to know what to expect with the weather ask a farmer. Farmers are the canaries in the coal mine when it comes to being aware of the effects of climate change on the land. They'll tell you how they were able to plant two weeks earlier than normal because of the record low precipitation in April, or how they were unable to dry down their grain crop or get machinery in their fields for harvest because of record high precipitation only three months later. Farmers see and, more notably, feel the effects of climate change on their crops, their animals, and their soil. It is that intimacy with the natural world that affords a farmer greater awareness that something is awry. In the decades to come, I believe we will see even more concerted efforts by farmers to conserve the soil and protect the water; so as to not send their profit down the river-literally.

When our farm flooded this July we were stuck on an island that our land had become for three days without electricity or fresh water. That poses many challenges when your basement is flooded and you have livestock. The response from our neighbors, family, and friends during the days and weeks that followed was incredibly humbling. In no time a generator, water pump, water jugs, etc. showed up at our door from people who drove through the flood waters to reach us. And there are countless stories like this from around the area. From food drives, to supply runs by boat, to American Red Cross relief, to volunteer clean-up crews and work parties, we see that when the community pulls together, great things can happen.

In the age of climate change it may be the adversity that we face that will foster greater unity amongst neighbors, a shared sense of community, and reverence for the natural world around us.

(Todd Rothe is a farmer, carpenter, consultant, and educator. Todd and his wife Kelsey own and operate River Road Farm in Marengo, WI. Todd holds a bachelor degree from Northland College in business leadership and management. He has over 17 years of farming experience and has contributed to many food and agriculture initiatives in the Chequamegon Bay region for the past 12 years.)