

## Happy Birthday, Farm Aid



“We are 21 years old today,” musical icon and Farm Aid president, Willie Nelson, said to rousing applause from several hundred family farmers, food and farming advocates, journalists, and sponsors gathered in a standing-room only tent shortly before the start of Farm Aid’s 2006 concert. “We are now an adult, and legal”, he added, with a laugh and more cheers from the audience.

When Farm Aid got its start, back in 1985, national newspapers carried daily stories of farm foreclosures and the financial and emotional depression that was ripping the heartland apart. African famine was also in the news, and the Live Aid concert brought artists from around the world together in a first-of-its-kind, multi-act charitable concert to raise funds for famine relief. Bob Dylan came on stage at Live Aid, and said, ‘its too bad some of the money being raised couldn’t go to help America’s struggling family farmers.’

Willie heard the comment, and was galvanized to action. He first recruited John Mellencamp and Neil Young. The three drafted dozens of others to play on the first show, and two months later the first Farm Aid concert happened. They’ve since shared the stage with about 400 acts. Unlike many charity events, all the artists perform for free, and cover their own expenses to get to the show. Money raised from the shows—almost \$30 million to date—goes to nonprofits working on food and farming issues, and to aid farmers with disaster relief.

Food Routes is a nonprofit grantee of Farm Aid. I ask Executive Director, Tim Schlitzer, what the organization does with funds from Farm Aid? “Farm Aid has gotten the connection between preserving farms and that farmers make a better profit by selling directly to the public,” he says. “They also realize that small family farmers are one of our best resources in the country to provide good, locally sustainable, whole foods. By supporting our ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’ program in 21 states, they are supporting a marketing system that allows farmers to connect with consumers.”

Hank Moss, a Louisiana rancher, provides a good example of the type of people who receive some help from the disaster relief fund. Hank’s ranch, located four miles from the coast was inundated by a twelve-foot storm surge

when Hurricanes Rita and Katrina hammered the Gulf Coast. He lost all his buildings, fencing, some cattle he hadn't been able to move before the storms, his crawfish and rice operations. When the water receded the land was poisoned by salt.

"Farm aid sent me a load of hay quickly after the storm," Hank told me. "It helped sustain the cattle and horses I was able to save. It [gave me] the first inkling of motivation—I had something back on my ranch of value. They also publicized our plight on their website and that was helpful with getting other people's attention and getting some aid from other people. Farm Aid gave us some validity and helped focus attention to the needs we had down here."

This year's concert—the major fundraising event for Farm Aid—was held in Camden, NJ, on September 30<sup>th</sup>. Visitors to this year's show not only enjoyed the music, but also a better class of fare than is usually available at entertainment venues, with organic treats ranging from beer to veggie burgers. Eleven acts, such as the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Government Mule, Los Lonely Boys, and Jerry Lee Lewis, joined the Farm Aid board members to support the cause.

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### **Contacts**

To learn more about Farm Aid, visit their website at [www.farmaid.org](http://www.farmaid.org), or call them at 1-800-farmaid. To find local-farm food providers in your area, visit [www.foodroutes.org](http://www.foodroutes.org).