

Child care has been silently crushing women farmers for generations. That may change soon. ^[1]

The upcoming farm bill is poised to prioritize child care for the first time. It could mean welcome relief for families in an industry that has historically brushed the issue aside.

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Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

After a decade of working on a university farm in Vancouver, Canada, Amy Frye and her husband, Jacob, were ready to go it alone: In 2015, they started to build their own farm in Skagit Valley, Washington. Around that same time, they also started to think about growing their family — Frye was almost in her mid-30s — but they had no idea how they'd be able to do both at once.

Frye remembers the farmers' gathering where she first asked her peers: Farming and kids — how do I make it work?

Everyone laughed. They would "figure it out," they were told.

But when Frye's first child, Leo, was born in January 2017, she remembers feeling wholly unprepared for the experience. The Fries had already had to take on their first employee when she was pregnant — though she'd still driven tractors and tried to squeeze into work wear that wasn't designed for her growing belly.

They tried to piece together what child care would look like for their son. They wanted to keep him with them as much as they could, but how could they when they were surrounded by dangerous machinery, when there was nowhere to pump? And, even if they wanted to leave him in the care of others, where would they take him when rural child care options were already so scarce?

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Looking back now, "in an ideal world I would not have maybe had kids so soon after having a farm. Having a kid just hit me like a ton of bricks," Frye said. "Our approach has been very haphazard and super stressful and expensive."

Her story is painfully common: About 74 percent of farm families had difficulty securing child care because of lack of affordability, availability or quality this year, and 77 percent reported having to make changes such as decreasing their working hours or hiring additional employees as a result of child care challenges. Half reported that having access to child care was important to maintaining and growing their farm. But women were almost twice as likely as men to report that child care was an important factor in farm decisions.

That data, the only of its kind and the result of a decade-long effort to bring attention to farming and child care, helped the issue reach the highest echelons of the farming world this year:

For the first time ever, the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union, the two largest farm organizations, have put child care as a priority in the farm bill, the massive federal spending legislation up for renewal this year that helps define food production policy and federal assistance for farmers and farmworkers.

The bill, which advocates hope will be finalized by the end of the year, is expected to contain a version of Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown's Expanding Childcare in Rural America Act. The bipartisan bill would tap into the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) rural development funds for projects that improve access, quality and cost of child care in rural areas. The bill has a slew of Republican cosponsors.

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Region: United States ^[3]

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legislation ^[6]

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/23/08/child-care-has-been-silently-crushing-women-farmers> [2] <https://19thnews.org/2023/08/2023-farm-bill-priorities-child-care-women-farmers/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/work-life-balance> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation>