

# Dairy Farm Loss: The Impact of Ag land Changes on the Dairy Industry and Rural Communities in Southern Wisconsin

## Research Questions

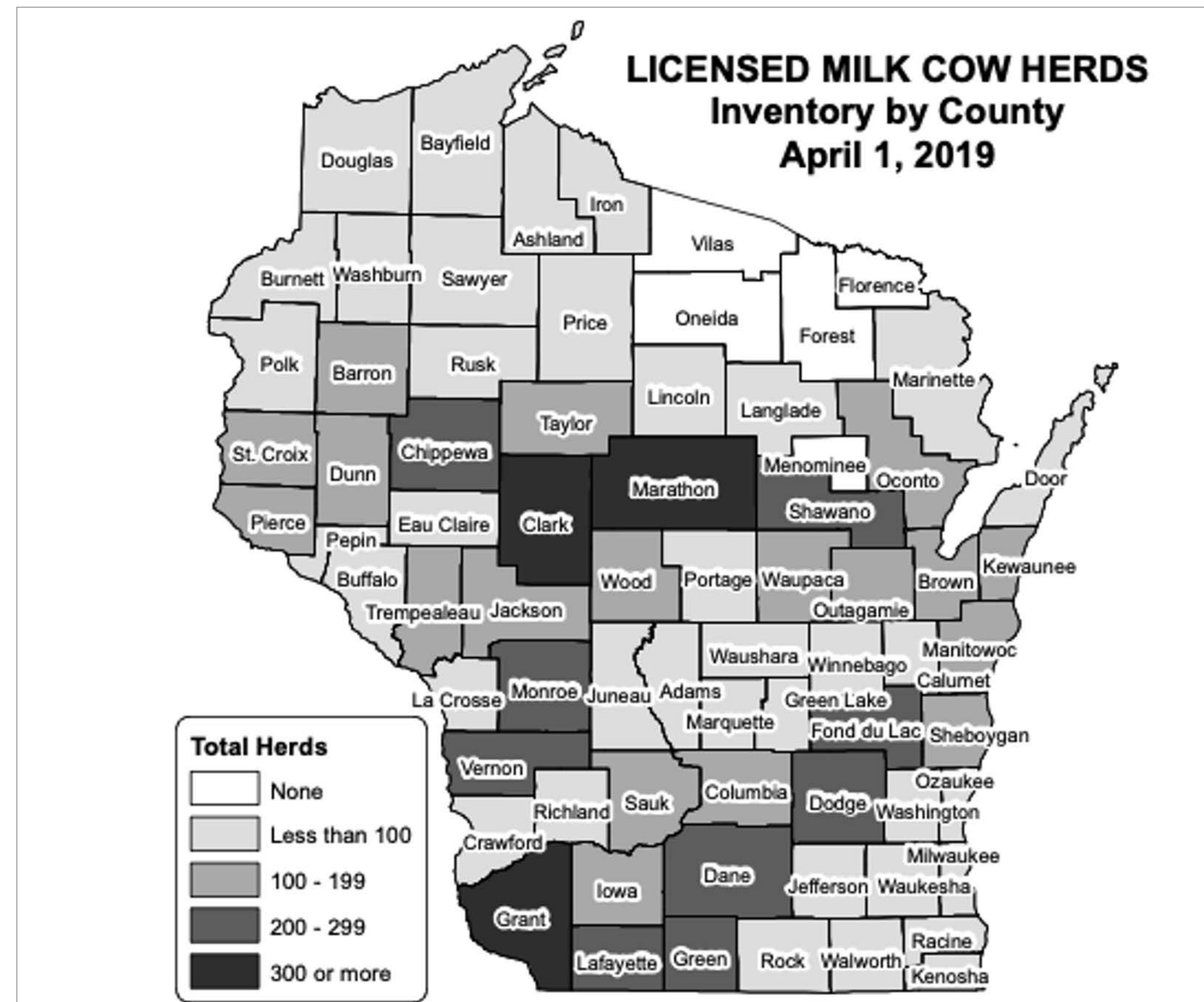
### How have changes in agricultural land affected the dairy industry and rural communities in southern Wisconsin?

How do landowners and farmers make decisions about what to do with their land?

How do connections to the land affect decisions?

Which land-based agricultural, conservation, and recreation policies would most effectively support the interests and needs of small and mid-sized dairy farms and their communities?

## Methodology



### Phase I:

#### Qualitative Research Focusing on Dane and Grant Counties in Wisconsin

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 53 people  
1 to 2 hours each

Dairy Farmers  
Other Farmers  
Farm Workers  
Farm Family Members  
NGO Representatives  
Gov Agency Reps  
Ag Business Reps  
Community Residents  
Municipal Leaders  
Farm or Env Activists

### Phase II:

#### Survey Focusing on Dane and Grant Counties in Wisconsin

## Central Findings

### 1. As agricultural land is changing, so too is the role of family in family farm

It is difficult to separate the idea of agricultural land from family. Idealized notion of family continues in views about dairy farms and marketing even as farms are consolidating.

### 2. Despite having strong connections to the land, farmers and community members rarely talk about land as a solution

Leasing land for solar panels/wind farms has been a way that several farmers talked about maintaining their family land while bringing in some income for retirement. Most people are not aware of and do not have hope in easements, corporate farming law, or conservation tax breaks as a solution to agricultural land problems.

### 3. As land is lost to development and consolidation, farmers are conflicted between farm as family and farm as business.

Family farm owners face internal and community conflict between maintaining land in the family/honoring family agricultural history and seeing the dairy farm as a business that needs to be informed by cost/benefit analyses only.

### 4. Political polarization is influencing responses to dairy industry changes

Polarizing rhetoric about environmentalists, conventional farmers, and rural or urban residents was woven throughout interviews

## Why Polarization Matters

### The Scholarship

- Divisions result from identity and resentment (Cramer, 2016)
- Geography & demographics influence voting patterns (Scala et al. 2017; Gimple et. al. 2020; Shellabarger et al. 2019)
- Farmers' politics affect reaction to government and ag policies (Campbell et al, 1960; Layman and Carson, 2002; Park & Jansen, 2014)

### Our Findings

- Interviewees often identified political polarization in their communities.
- However, further investigation into these ideas as they relate to farmer and community member experiences complicates simplistic overlapping delineations between rural and urban or conservative and liberal

Policy makers should be aware of polarization and these complications. Points of connection serve as potential inroads to addressing farm loss without exacerbating polarization.

## Evidence of Polarization

"If you have to use liberal or conservative as terms, which I don't think are always very helpful terms, but if you had to use those two, [my] church is liberal leaning, which at many places does not connect deeply with, uh, um, some of the values that I think many farmers hold, [pauses and sighs] you know, God and country [chuckles] are very important values."

(woman in her 60s who lives on a farm with her husband)

"If we would take politics out of it all, I think we'd all get along better...there's too much right against left. And, no matter what, the laws are trying to help everybody. But some people don't see it like that."  
(municipal leader)

Claudine Pied, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology  
[piedc@uwplatt.edu](mailto:piedc@uwplatt.edu)

Shan Sappleton, PhD  
Associate Professor of Political Science  
[sappletons@uwplatt.edu](mailto:sappletons@uwplatt.edu)

Hayden Pierce & Ian Stetzel  
Student Research Assistants