

Sun Sentinel doesn't understand the challenges facing Florida's farmers | Opinion

By JIM ALDERMAN, SR.

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Activist groups want to drive farms out of Florida, writes Jim Alderman, Sr., the owner of Alderman Farms in Palm Beach County. He argues that Florida Senate Bill 88 is needed to keep farmers from packing up and moving out because of “unjust, nuisance lawsuits.” (Carline Jean / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The Sun Sentinel's [recent editorial](#) about Senate Bill 88 – Florida's Right to Farm – was full of opinion and not a lot of facts. It's easy to express an opinion, but hard to run a farm. I'm a farmer, and I know what it takes. I also know that Senate Bill 88 is essential to keep farming in Florida alive.

I started Alderman Farms in 1979 in Palm Beach County. Ninety percent of our produce is organic grown on 1,100 acres in Florida. We offer a wide variety of vegetables, including tomatoes, eggplant, yellow squash, zucchini and more. Four decades ago when I started this business, the space around was wide open. Today, our farming operation is surrounded by hundreds of residential homes and commercial properties.

While the urban growth around us changes our community, it does not change our mission. Florida's farms and ranches produce safe, wholesome and affordable food for families across the Sunshine State and around the nation. We're known as the nation's winter salad bowl because during the winter months, Florida's warm climate allows us to grow fresh fruits and vegetables when others cannot.

When the COVID-19 global health pandemic threatened the health and safety of Americans and disrupted global trade, our food supply was not at risk. The farms throughout Florida, including mine, continued to work, growing and harvesting the food that feeds the nation.

Yet, activist groups want to drive farms out of Florida. Through public attacks, protests and lawsuits, activists are using every trick in the book to drive farmers to throw their hands up, pack up and move out.

Over the years, we have received a series of complaints — any of which could have led to lawsuits — from frustrated neighbors, new to having a farm as a neighbor. One individual filed complaints about the “eyesore” of our farming equipment, calling it “junk.” These are the tools we need to grow and harvest the produce we provide to the community.

In another example, neighbors complained of a “toxic” odor coming from our farm. Authorities were called, and the fire department, sheriff’s office and health department showed up at our door. The cause of the odor was not toxic; in fact, it was the natural smell of organic fertilizer used to support the growth and development of our vegetables.

Now, with the influx of people escaping the Northeast and finding respite in Florida, there are even greater threats to the long-term sustainability of agriculture. New neighbors, even more unfamiliar with local farming operations, complain of the hard work that goes into them. Farmers can get slapped with unjust, nuisance lawsuits, which require significant time, funding and other resources to defend. Farmers are distracted from their mission to grow and harvest our food by having to defend what’s right, and just.

The average farm’s profits are already razor-thin. Add on attorney’s fees, and profits could dwindle to nothing. Struggling to make ends meet, farmers often are forced to turn their lands over to development just to pay the bills.

Senate Bill 88 by Senator Jason Brodeur and HB 1601 by Representative Jay Williamson expand protections available under Florida’s Right to Farm Act to prevent unjust, nuisance lawsuits. The keywords are “unjust” and “nuisance.” The goal of the legislation is to enable farmers who are doing the right thing to focus on their task at hand.

The bill will protect the long-term sustainability of our safe, domestic food supply. Without that, we’ll be forced to import our food, resulting in higher risks, greater costs and possible military conflicts.

Senate Bill 88 does not apply to lawsuits already filed. The Sun Sentinel Editorial Board is wrong to tie this measure to the lawsuit filed against nine

sugar companies two years ago. The bill does not apply retroactively. (Editor's note: The plaintiff's lawyers say otherwise.)

Importantly, there will remain multiple avenues through which legitimate complaints can be filed against farmers.

As a proud farmer, I have spent my life working to feed this community that continues to grow. We are a family business, and my son who works with me on the farm will one day carry on our family tradition. This is our livelihood, producing wholesome food to provide to others. This is exactly why it is essential to keep farmers farming, like mine, with food that feeds the world.

If you are grateful for the safe, wholesome supply of fresh food we have here in Florida, support SB 88 and HB 1601. These measures are designed to protect the long-term sustainability of the farming industry that makes this possible.

Jim Alderman, Sr., is the owner of Alderman Farms in Palm Beach County.