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DISCOVERING THE *NEW* ESSENTIAL

Daniel Smith, President & CEO, Cooperative Network

The optimism so many of us who work in rural businesses and communities felt for 2020 and beyond left before the last snow drifts of winter. Now, as spring turns into summer, we struggle to adjust to the new reality of closed workplaces, record unemployment and collapsed markets. This is in addition to greatly altered personal lives where family routines, travel and social interactions have been upended.

It is tempting to think only about what has been lost, like a homeowner staring at the foundation after the tornado swept the home away. It hurts to be in this situation. Sometimes, it feels better if we can find someone to blame. We want to return, as quickly as possible to our pre-pandemic lives. We want our optimism back.

I trust, that given time, good science and effective leadership, we will reclaim much of what COVID-19 has taken from us. But it is not enough to merely reclaim. We must be aware of what this pandemic teaches, give it thought and consideration and commit to a preparedness that will serve us in future crises. And there will be future crises.

Cooperative Network supports 250 cooperatives from a dozen business sectors across Minnesota and Wisconsin. Our members serve every segment of our economy, including finance, healthcare, housing, agriculture and energy. All of our members are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 on workforce, markets, supply chain and operations. Our rural communities and agriculture have undergone severe economic and social hardships in recent years. To many, COVID-19 feels like a knockout punch.

In the midst of this crisis, we must not ignore the importance of our rural cooperatives, businesses and farms. The pandemic has redefined the word "essential." It has expanded its scope to include the grocery store clerk, the hospital custodian, the nurse and nurse's aide, the delivery person, the teacher and so many more we once took for granted. Our mental list of essential goods, services and personnel has expanded exponentially.

In addition, many more now realize that food doesn't automatically appear on store shelves. Someone, somewhere made the commitment to grow it. A processor committed to processing and distributing the product, and a retailer made it available to the consumer. We know better today than we did one year ago how vital a diverse, efficient and safe food system is to our nation. It is, as the new buzz word claims, essential.

No business, startup or mature, urban or rural, has been immune from the economic upheaval brought on by COVID-19. Our cooperatives, many of which have served their members for more than a century with power, communications, supplies, processing and marketing, are only as strong and viable as their members. This is why it is, and here comes that word again, *essential* that economic stability replaces volatility on our farms and rural communities.



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Stability cannot be achieved through emergency stimulus programs, trade disputes, rescue packages or any short-term Band-Aid approach to what currently ails us. Stability requires profitability, economic confidence, market security and risk management. Supply and demand must be kept in balance. Economic stability requires investment in broadband, education, childcare, healthcare and infrastructure. Only then can multi-generational farms and rural businesses trust the future. Only then can cooperatives continue to serve as the backbone of the rural economy. Only then can we be better prepared for the next crisis than we were for this one.

Much of what COVID-19 has taught is we should have already known. Perhaps we did, we just chose to ignore it, or it was easier to claim it was too expensive or too idealistic. But now we know, access to healthcare in every community, food security and economic resiliency are all essential to our collective wellbeing.

Many of our farm families and small business owners feel like they are on life support right now. It is understandable. We are all seeking restoration of opportunities lost to COVID-19. Just as we now have a new appreciation for what is essential, we also have a deeper appreciation for what is truly important in our lives. We know we must be better prepared for what lies ahead. There is no better way to do so than to learn the essential lessons of today.

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About the author: Daniel Smith serves as the President and Chief Executive Officer of Cooperative Network, one of the nation's largest trade associations. Cooperative Network supports cooperatives in Minnesota and Wisconsin from more than a dozen business sectors with legislative advocacy, education and business development programs.

Prior to joining Cooperative Network, Smith served as the Administrator for the Division of Agricultural Development at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. In this role, he directed the domestic and international market development efforts for the state's agricultural economy.

Smith formerly served as Chief Executive Officer of Midwestern BioAg, a national farm supply company based in Wisconsin. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he owned and operated a dairy farm in northwestern Illinois for 30 years.