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hostile environment, but how to positively thrive in this age of uncertainty.

"Farming on the edge ... of what?" I asked my wife Melanie when the idea for this column first surfaced.

"You don't need anything else," Melanie said. She knows, after putting up with me for 28 years tomorrow (happy anniversary, dear!), that I sometimes get ahead of myself. "It could be the edge of town, the edge of marketing, the edge of innovation. Take your pick," she said. "The list is endless."

Wise woman, my wife.
Lancaster Farming Editor

Andy Andrews has that kind of common sense, too. "I am looking for alternative farming methods in these days of dismal dairy prices. Anything you could sup-

ply to help 'jump-start' a sagging farm economy would be great!"

But like Andy, we farmers

tend to be optimists. And like firefighters, we don't give up easily. That's why we're still farming, despite low prices, rising

costs, droughts, floods, and this nearly sunless spring that looked more like February than May.

Fortunately, many farmers are volunteer firefighters. (Yeah, I'm a volunteer, too. Twenty years of service, so far, but who's counting?) That's good because farming today is a lot like firefighting. You have to be quick, flexible, and always keep thinking half a dozen steps ahead. When normal procedures don't work or fire conditions deteriorate rapidly, you have to change tactics and tools to quench the flames.

The farm economy today may be giving off heavy smoke. Flames may be blowing through the roof. But we can still save the house and its occupants, I believe, if we keep our heads and make full use of the many resources at our command.

Former Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower gave us a place to start. "When you find that you've dug yourself into a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging," he said two years ago at the annual "Farming for the Future" conference hosted by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture.

"Dump debt!" U.S. Sen. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) told farm writers at a press briefing in Washington this spring. "Dump debt, and become politically active to insist that government dump debt as well. This is the worst possible time to add to debt."

He was talking about the big picture in Washington, of course — the soaring federal budget deficit, the possible impact of President Bush's proposed tax cuts, and mounting problems paying for Social Security and Medicare.

Commodity programs are at risk. Taxpayers are getting sick of farm subsidies. "It's clear to me that the pressure on support for agriculture is going to be intense," the senator noted.

So even paying off your credit card bill is a good step in the right direction. We don't quite have the money to do that right away, so I did the next best thing. I just transferred the balance to a new card that offers zero percent interest through Au-

gust 2004, as long as I make the minimum payment each month. We'll pay it off long before interest kicks in again. And if we do charge anything to our old card, we'll pay it off every month.

Diversification is a survival tip strongly recommended by Tom Dorr, USDA undersecretary for rural development.

"The farm of the early 21st century will look nothing like the farm of the early 20th century," said Dorr, who farms in Iowa. "American agriculture is at a crucial crossroad. New strategies and new ideas are needed. It's time we paint an American Gothic for the 21st century."

"I'm not encouraging farmers to take senseless risks, but I would say that farmers have not used their asset base — their land — to its maximum return."

Good point. Instead of going to a bank and borrowing money to modernize our vegetable operation, Melanie and I sold our development rights to Lehigh County in 1997. Then we poured most of the money right back into the farm, paying cash for a heated greenhouse for seed starting, a used walk-in cooler, a used tractor with a front-end loader, a PTO-powered tiller, a plastic mulch layer, and other equipment.

We also paved our 600-foot gravel driveway. That was a good business decision. Now 100 families eagerly drive out to our farm each week during the season to buy vegetables, herbs, blueberries, and cut flowers. They don't have to worry about mud or gravel messing up their fancy cars or shoes. Most of our customers come from within a 15-mile radius of the farm and live in new houses on Used-To-Be-A-Farm Acres.

We sell everything we can grow, directly to the people who will eat it. The only problem is keeping up with demand. There are an awful lot of hungry people out there. And most of them tell us that they're completely fed up with the tired, tasteless produce in the supermarkets. We set our

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“A grower I met from Alabama, for example, sold part of his land to a housing developer. The builder then gave everyone who bought a new house a one-year membership in the farmer’s weekly vegetable service. It is OK to get creative and use your imagination.”

George DeVault
organic vegetable farmer

ply to help 'jump-start' a sagging farm economy would be great!"

Sagging? With nearly every commodity selling below the cost

tend to be optimists. And like firefighters, we don't give up easily. That's why we're still farming, despite low prices, rising

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