

The Changing Landscape of the Local Feed Store

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Feed stores have been around as long as feed has been fed to animals. Here in our neck of the woods, however, the feed business has been in constant change and restructuring.

As a child, the feed store was a run-down shack with a railroad track behind it — simple, functional, and full of character.

With the rise of farming and the poor quality of seeds available at the time, farmers began banding together to form cooperatives. By pooling resources, they could develop and procure better seed for planting. Those early cooperatives soon expanded, offering not just seed but nearly everything a farmer might need.

By the mid-1920s, cooperatives were appearing across the country, serving their local regions. As demand grew, so did their footprint. Eventually, most small cities had their own feed store — or were within 30 miles of one.

Independent stores thrived for decades, though many were eventually absorbed by expanding co-ops. Still, some held their independence. Companies like CFC Farm & Home, Southern States, and Rockingham grew significantly between the 1950s and 1980s, expanding across hundreds of square miles.

Then came a shift few feed stores were prepared for.

Indoor malls changed retail. Then Walmart perfected the “one-stop shop” model. Consumers grew accustomed to getting everything in one place. For a time, feed stores were protected by their specialization. Their product mix didn’t easily translate to the general retail population.

But that protection didn’t last forever.

When an established farm supply company applied the big-box model to agriculture, the industry changed again.

Founded in 1938, Tractor Supply Co. opened its 100th store by 1964. Over time, it positioned itself as a one-stop shop for everyone from full-time farmers to hobbyists, hunters, equine enthusiasts, and pet owners. Today, stores typically carry between 15,000 and 20,000 products — from clothing and fencing to lawn tools, home goods, animal feed, and pet supplies. Around 15% of in-store inventory is tailored to each region. Online, the company offers over 100,000 products across numerous categories.

In the five years I’ve been delivering this magazine, I’ve watched cooperative locations close. I’ve seen five small independent stores lock their doors. Southern States sold portions of its operations, giving rise to names like EverGRO and Freedom Ag. Meanwhile, I’ve watched dozens of Tractor Supply stores open — often near existing feed stores.

In 2024, Tractor Supply operated over 2,200 locations, with a long-term goal of reaching 3,000. Whether they ultimately reach that number isn’t the point. We’ve seen this story before — family-run stores in towns across America struggling when national chains arrive.

Tractor Supply has a business model built on scale. Smaller stores often can’t compete with that purchasing power. The past few years have also been difficult for suppliers, with tariffs and rising costs adding pressure. Today, more than half of Tractor Supply’s revenue comes from consumable, usable, and edible products — including feed. With that kind of demand, supply chains tighten. It raises a difficult question: If you aren’t producing your own feed, will you always have reliable access to sell?

Some companies, like CFC Farm & Home and Farmers Cooperative Association, Inc., operate their own feed mills and remain outside the Tractor Supply catalog model — for now.

If you value your local feed store, now is the time to support it. These stores aren’t just retail outlets. They’re places where farmers once gathered, where someone always knew the answer to your question, and where experience mattered.

Getting advice at a local feed store used to mean speaking with someone who understood your land, your animals, and your challenges. That kind of knowledge isn’t always easy to find in a national chain staffed by employees who may not share that lived experience.

The question isn’t whether change will happen. It already has. The real question is whether we will support the stores that built our communities — before they become stories we tell about how things used to be.

Please support the advertising stores on the opposite page if they are in your area. We do and we hope you can too.

EverGRO

Loudoun Milling

Farmers Cooperative Association

CFC Farm & Home Center

