

U.S. must cultivate young farmers

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It didn't come as much of a surprise that the Census of Agriculture released last week showed that the average age of American farmers has increased. It is troubling, however, that the aging seems to be accelerating while the number of young farmers is declining.

Data from the census shows the average age increased from 55.3 in 2002 to 57.1 in 2007. In previous census periods, the average age has increased by about a year. The data shows that the number of farmers older than 75 has grown, but the number of farmers under 25 has dropped since 2002.

These are trends that are killing rural America and leaving the production of our food in the hands of fewer and fewer men and women.

Congress has been working on ways to spend \$900 billion or more to stimulate the economy. It might be a good time to make it possible for young people to enter production agriculture as a career.

The challenges have been clear for years. Commercial farming is an expensive proposition, both in terms of the long-term capital investment necessary to buy land and equipment and the operating capital needed to plant, cultivate and harvest a crop or maintain a herd. The economics of production agriculture favor large operations, and that takes the kind of money only mature producers are often able to put together.

It's possible to start small, working a small operation while keeping a job in town. The profits of that scale of agriculture are often meager, especially when weighed against the amount of work required to make a go of the thing. Many smart young men and women soon realize that they can make more money doing something else.

Those who stick with it, those who love it because of the lifestyle, often find it difficult to obtain the critical mass necessary to propel them into full-time farming.

There are opportunities for some growers to make money producing niche crops - organic produce, for example - on relatively small plots. The census shows that niche is growing. But in much of rural America, it's not a viable full-time job.

Rather than subsidize the losses of Hollywood producers, as a provision of the stimulus bill stricken by the Senate would have done, how about fronting, in some meaningful way, the startup money young people need to enter the business? It could come in the form of a long-term loan with advantageous interest rates, or maybe a grant for a down payment. Starting with more equity, smart operators can make smaller farms pay, putting them in a position to expand earlier in their career.

There is a host of programs already available, but census statistics suggest that they aren't doing enough to get young people into farming.

It's also important that vocational agriculture programs are adequately funded. This is where many are exposed to the possibility of a career in agriculture and receive the basic building blocks to succeed.

An investment here is an investment in America's economy - and in its security.

In most cases, young farmers would take over from older farmers. The older farmers would more than likely either spend some of the money they get themselves, or transfer it to their children, who would spend it. That would spread the stimulus far from the farm.

Putting young families on farms would help revitalize rural communities. Families require more services, buy more groceries, buy more clothes, buy more of just about everything than older empty-nesters.

A generational shift in agriculture is also required to ensure that there are enough skilled young people ready to take over the production of the nation's food supply for the next half-century.

A farm is a business, a business that can easily cost a million dollars to enter. Until we make it easier for young people to buy in, we continue to put the long-term health of a domestic industry that is the envy of the world at risk.