



Beginning Farmers

The average American farmer is 58.3 years old, and upwards of 60 percent of the nation's 3.2 million farmers are within 10 years of retirement age, according to the 2012 Ag Census. By some estimates, two-thirds of agricultural land will change hands in the next 25 years, meaning agriculture will see a huge transition as retiring farmers and ranchers turn over the reigns to new and beginning farmers.

In order to ensure our food security for future generations, we need to be fostering the next generation of family farmers and ranchers today. The good news is that the number of young farmers is trending upwards. In fact, the number of young people who said farming was their primary occupation increased by 11 percent between 2007 and 2012. However, there are many barriers that are preventing aspiring farmers from entering the field or pushing them to quit. We need to address those barriers and make agriculture a viable and profitable career choice for those who want to pursue it.

Barriers to Entry

Beginning farmers endure all of the same challenges that more established producers do, but because they lack experience, capital, and resources, they are far more vulnerable to uncertainties. New farmers and ranchers have entered the field during worst farm economy in well over a decade. Net farm income this year is projected to be less than half of what it was just five years ago, making it exceptionally challenging for new producers facing high upfront costs to break even, let alone make a profit.

But beginning farmers and ranchers face unique difficulties as well, with land access being among the most prominent. Many new producers do not come from agricultural backgrounds, so they will likely not inherit arable land. And those seeking to purchase their own land must grapple with high land values and encroaching development. Additionally, the majority of producers enter the field with a number of other hindrances, including substantial student debt, lack of experience and business planning skills, and inability to access essential resources like credit and health care.

Beginning Farmers in the Farm Bill

The 2018 Farm Bill must strengthen beginning farmer programs so new and aspiring producers can successfully start a sustain a career in agriculture. Congress can do this if they:

- ✓ **Expand crop insurance** options for producers of all operation types and sizes.
- ✓ **Increase direct loan lending limits** from \$300,000 to \$500,000, and ensure beginning farm set-asides in the Farm Service Agency's loan portfolio is met.
- ✓ **Support programs**, including the Local Food Promotion Program and the Farmers Market Promotion Program, that bolster diverse markets.
- ✓ **Eliminate barriers** that prevent participation in working lands programs and provide additional outreach for such programs.