

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE
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American Farm Bureau Federation

Never Underestimate Today's Young Farmers
By Ben LaCross

Young farmers and ranchers are alive and kicking. In fact, never in my adult life have I been so inspired by agriculture's future leaders as I am right now.

So, understandably, I was dismayed and puzzled after reading a recent blog post by a staffer from the activist group Natural Resources Defense Council, titled "Increasing age of farmers puts our food system at risk."

The writer used numerous disjointed statistics to support her unfounded thesis: "The scary truth is that industrial agriculture is failing to breed a crop of bright young farmers to take their (older farmers) place."

From my viewpoint, as a young farmer, I am amazed by my fellow young farmers and ranchers. These young people are motivated, community-minded, environmentally conscious and ready to lead agriculture. Perhaps the writer should have gotten out into the countryside to meet a few of my young counterparts.

Make no mistake, the challenges we face in agriculture are real. But young farmers and ranchers are equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and experience to produce food, fuel and fiber for our ever-growing population.

As a specialty crop grower, I find it very interesting to get to know young farmers in different sectors of agriculture and learn about the issues they are dealing with.

We talk about succession planning, such as how we can effectively transfer responsibilities on the farm from our parents and grandparents to ourselves. We talk about connecting consumers with the food we are growing for them. We talk about food safety. We talk about how we can meet consumer demand. We never talk about diminishing numbers of young farmers and ranchers, as we see firsthand the growing youth movement in agriculture.

Annually, nearly 900 young farmers and ranchers under the age of 35 from around the nation attend Farm Bureau's Young Farmers & Ranchers National Leadership Conference to learn more about agriculture and network with one another. This year, for the first time, we partnered with the Agriculture Department, which held its Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Conference in conjunction with our meeting.

In addition, groups like FFA and 4-H help young kids grow leadership skills, gain a sense of self-worth that only agriculture can teach and ignite the entrepreneurial spirit in hundreds of thousands of elementary and high school children.

Each year, more than 50,000 FFA members gather in Indianapolis to compete, grow as individuals and celebrate their role in agriculture. While not all those members will become farmers, FFA broadens their perspectives on agriculture and rural leadership. I am always amazed at the poise and ability these young people have and I can't help but be proud that the next generation of farmers are so engaged.

Agriculture is a challenge and a responsibility to those of us involved in it. We understand the stakes. A nation of full bellies and warm bodies is our calling. The demographics of agriculture may be changing, but young farmers and ranchers are poised to continue to put food on America's dinner table.

Make no mistake; the future of American agriculture is in caring and able hands.