

The graying of farm operators

The increasing average age of farmers and the lack of young farmers are often topics of discussion and policy resolutions at the meetings of general farm organizations. These concerns reflect the long-term trend of the median age of principal farm operators in the US.

According to the Census of Agriculture the average age has increased from 50.5 in 1982 to 58.3 in 2012, the latest data available. Farmers age 65 or over on December 31, 2012 constituted nearly one-third (31.5 percent) of all principal farm operators. At the same time, farmers aged 44 or younger represented only 11.7 percent of all principal operators.

We can see this same trend by looking at the change in the percentage of farms with operators who had 10 years or fewer of experience between the 1982 Census of Agriculture (38 percent) and the one taken in 2012 (17.2 percent).

So why are we seeing this trend and when will it stop? The answer to the second part of this question is, “Who knows?” The answer to the first question is a little less definite, but there are many ideas. Let’s work our way through some of the possible answers, because only if we know the answer can we address the concern in terms of policies that might slow down the trend.

Until the recent opioid crisis—the 2012 Census was completed before the impact of opioid crisis hit—the average lifespan of US residents has been on an upward trend. Thus, it could be argued that this trend accounts for some of the graying of the average US farmer.

In some cases, the principal operator listed in the census may be an older member of the family with most of the management and labor is being provided by those two or more decades younger.

And, then there is what might be called the WWI theory: *How Ya Gonna Keep 'em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree)?* In later years it was simply the lure of big city lights. We all know of farm kids who had the opportunity to go to college to get an education and they never thought of returning.

The high cost of purchasing the land and machinery that are required in a modern farming operation has often been identified as a barrier to younger persons who want to go into farming. The policy result has been the development of young and beginning farmer programs, that provide financing and/or educational options.

A related barrier is the lack of access to land as the result of farms getting larger. Well-established farmers may be able to outbid potential entrants to farming.

Other potential reasons for the decreasing number of young/new farmers may simply be that young people have more professional than they did a half a century ago, or maybe they would rather work a 40-hour-work-week job.

Certainly, each of these have a role in the changes we are seeing in the average age of farmers. To this list we would like to offer two: farm profitability and health care.

We all know of farmers who have discouraged their children from thinking about farming as their life’s work because of extended years of low profitability. They don’t want their children to have to struggle like they have. By their calculation the farm could be sold, and the proceeds could be divided up among the children, providing each of them with a significant nest egg.

But if the price of farm commodities had covered the cost of production in most years, those parents might have had a different attitude and been more encouraging when a child said she wanted to return to the home place and make a living by farming.

The second possible factor in the lower share of new farmers entering agriculture is certainly health care. Individual health care policies are more expensive than group policies and those in turn are more expensive than employer-paid health insurance.

As the 2020 presidential race heats up, we are hearing more and more about universal health care coverage for all US residents. The details of the plans vary from candidate to candidate, but the discussion is more widespread than it has been in the past.

Some issues like the lights of the big city, 40 hour-work-week jobs, and the general aging of the US population are things that we can do little about. But developing a farm program that supports farm commodity prices at 95 percent of the full cost-of-production is within our grasp. So is some form of universal health care coverage that does not ask a young person to risk their health care or that of their family to come back home and become the next generation on the family farm.

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