

Vilsack Wants To 'Replenish' The Farm Supply

Some Say USDA Is Not Moving Fast Enough With Existing Beginning Farmer Programs



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WASHINGTON, D.C.

Winding along the gravel roads to our farm in North Dakota recently, we spotted a rare site. Another vehicle.

It's not unusual to see tractors and haying equipment in a few farm fields and people working along their farmsteads, but there are days when no one except the postman drives by.

As some of you know, there are several counties across Rural America where the population has declined dramatically. Schools have con-

solidated, store fronts have closed, and it's not unusual to drive 30 miles to find a restaurant or grocery store that's open.

“Yet, progress to get it off the ground has been very, very slow, and the office itself has been housed deep within the bureaucracy rather than directly under the Secretary as specified in the Farm Bill. Hopefully with staff about to be hired, the office will be full-functioning soon.”

The new Conservation Reserve Program Transition Incentive Program (CRP-TIP) was officially begun by USDA's Farm Service Agency recently. It provides incentives for CRP contract holders who do not intend to get back into farming to sell or lease to beginning or minority farmers.

“With the rule for the program now in place, the question now is where is USDA's plan to ag-

Who Are The Beginning Farmers And Ranchers?

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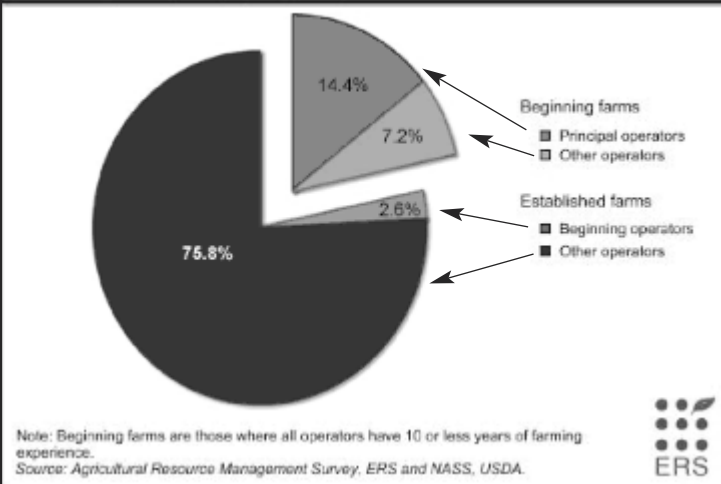
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Generally, a beginning farm is considered to be one that is operated by one or more operators who have 10 years or less of experience operating a farm or ranch. In 2008, approximately 21 percent of family farms met that defini-

tion, according to USDA's Economic Research Service. Beginning farms were more likely to be small farms than established farms and in fact were less likely to produce any agricultural products (see table). Beginning farms accounted for 9 percent of the total production value of family farms in 2008. There are also es-

established farms that are operated jointly by more experienced operators and beginning farmers. While the majority of beginning farmers (89 percent in 2008) operated beginning farms, 11 percent of beginning farmers (making up less than 3 percent of all farmers) jointly operated established farms with experienced farmers. Δ

Beginning farmers make up about one-fifth of all farms and some established farms are operated jointly by beginning farmers, 2008



gressively promote and do outreach on the program?” notes NSAC.

“Or for instance, the statutory Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, whose charge it is to advise the Secretary on how USDA can better serve beginning farmers and adopt policies to create new farming opportunities, has ceased functioning during the first two years of the Obama Administration after never missing a year during the Clinton and Bush years.” NSAC wants to know: “Why have no appointments been made and no meetings held?”

The last farm bill also authorized the creation of a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account program to assist low income individuals to become farmers through matched savings accounts and financial training. It also created a new national program, based on an earlier pilot program, linking retiring and new farmers through federal guarantees of private land contracts into a nationwide program. Neither of these programs seems ready to get off the ground at USDA.

Profitability is key
Several sources say that, while USDA programs can be helpful, but the bottom line in bringing more people out into the countryside is profit.

“We'd agree with the Secretary that more farmers would be a good thing. However, one has to wonder where we would get enough land to provide 100,000 farmers with a reasonable living,” says American Farm Bureau Federation Public Policy Director Mary Kay Thatcher: “If they were all small farmers and doing this on a part-time basis, it might be possible – but not on a normal sized scale operation.”

Randy Russell, a former USDA official who is now president the lobbying firm Russell & Barron President agrees that the Secretary is on the right track.

“The Secretary is right to focus on the dire need for economic development in rural America. And he is right to focus on the cultivation of the next generation of American farming greatness,” says Russell. “While the goal of increasing the number of farmers is a laudable objective, ultimately the goal is to enhance the economic viability of those family farmers who derive a majority of their income from the farm and who are full time farmers. USDA's definition of farmers is so low (gross income of \$1,000/yr) that simply looking at sheer numbers of farmers doesn't address the real issue – creating an environment where full time, family farmers can make a profit from producing and selling their production. This means having the right balance of tax, regulatory, environmental, and trade policies in place. Profit is the key to growth in agriculture.” Δ

Existing tools
Yet, some beginning farmer advocates say there are already several tools in the USDA “toolbox” to help incentivize new and beginning farmers. The problem is, they are not being used says the Center for Rural Affairs Rural Policy Program Assistant Director Traci Bruckner

“With USDA not requiring the actively engaged rule for the commodity programs, people can set up all kinds of paper farms and get subsidized on every acre they add to their operations . . . The biggest barriers to beginning farmers are access to land and access to capital,” says Bruckner. “I think the fact that we have unlimited USDA payments going to really large farms makes it tougher to get the land and capital needed to start farming.”

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) points out several unfulfilled programs created in the last farm bill to help beginning farmers. For example, the 2008 Farm Bill authorized the creation of a new Office of Advocacy and Outreach to coordinate policy department-wide on beginning farmer and minority farmer issues.

SARA WYANT: *Publisher weekly e-newsletter, AgriPulse.*