

FARMING IS PUBLIC SERVICE!

STUDENT LOAN DEBT IS AN OBSTACLE FOR MANY AMERICANS, BUT OFTEN AN INSURMOUNTABLE ONE FOR YOUNG FARMERS

Student loan debt has become one of the most significant challenges our nation's young farmers and ranchers face. Graduating from college with debt, young people are finding that they either cannot afford to farm while paying down their loans or they are prevented from leveraging capital to start and grow a farm business.

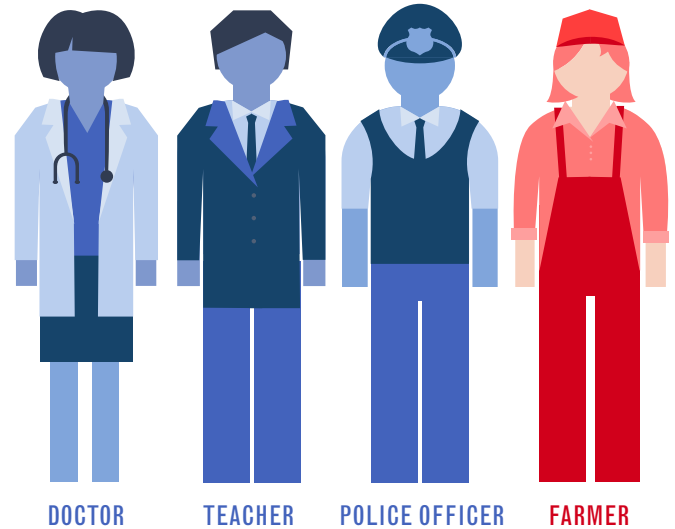
Just as we've provided incentives for Americans to enter medicine, education, and other public service careers, we need to encourage young people to choose careers in agriculture.

Farming is a public service — we must add farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

WE NEED FARMERS

In 2010, USDA Secretary Vilsack challenged Congress and the nation to set a goal of bringing 100,000 new farmers onto the land in 5 years. With 63% of farmland on the cusp of transition, growing a new generation of farmers is critical. But between 2007 and 2012, the number of beginning farmers actually fell by 20%.¹

The average age of U.S. farmers continues to climb—in 2012 it reached over 58 for the first time.² Farmers over 65 outnumber farmers under 35 by a margin of 6-to-1. As the nation faces a crisis of attrition within the agricultural sector, it is essential that we help a new generation of growers succeed.



Starting a farm requires significant start-up capital for land, equipment, training and other expenses, and it is unlikely to initially make money.³ Fear of defaulting on student loans prevents many young people from entering careers in agriculture. When young people with student debt do decide to start a farm, their existing debt prevents many from accessing the credit they need to grow their businesses. We are seeing an entire generation of young farmers trapped by student loan debt.

DECREASE IN BEGINNING FARMERS (2007–2012)

20%

AVERAGE AGE OF US FARMERS

58

% OF FARMERS UNDER 35 YEARS OLD

6%

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“Five years ago, we thought we would be starting our own farm by now. But that dream is a long way off, even though we are thoroughly trained in agricultural science and business management. We could be contributing to local economic growth by starting a sustainable farm with a sound business plan. Meanwhile, we are both fortunate to be gainfully employed—I now teach beginning farmers at a university certificate program, preparing them to go out and achieve the dream that I can’t. I hope that their debt from this schooling doesn’t do the same to them...”

We made the choice to pay down our debt as fast as we can afford to, while still trying to accumulate a little savings. It will still take another 15 years. And without our jobs, we would not be able to make our \$900 monthly loan payments. At almost 30, we now face another crossroads: do we save for a farm, or do we save for a family? Our student loan debt does not leave room for both.”

—Meredith Epstein, Maryland



FARMING IS PUBLIC SERVICE

- Agriculture meets one of our most basic needs—producing the food we eat.
- Farmers steward nearly one billion acres of land, which is about half of the land area of the U.S.
- Farmers support rural economies, providing jobs and income that have helped these communities weather population decline and the Great Recession.

To ensure the success of the next generation of farmers, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program must be amended to include farmers.

As the U.S. farm population ages, the need for new farmers has never been greater. We cannot, however, expect new farmers to succeed in a capital-intensive career when they are saddled by student loan debt. Amending the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program to include farmers is an essential step to stabilizing our farm population and lifting up a new generation of rural entrepreneurs.

SOLVING THE STUDENT LOAN DEBT CHALLENGE

Fortunately, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program was created in 2007 to help people enter professions that provide a public good, but offer salaries too limited to manage student loan debt. Currently, this program covers teachers, nurses, doctors, public interest attorneys, government employees, and nonprofit professionals. Once enrollees make 10 years of income-driven student loan payments, the balance of their federal loan debt is forgiven. The program is a practical way for the government to incentivize careers of critical need.

1. USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service. (2014). *Beginning Farmers: Characteristics of Farmers by Yearson Current Farm*. Retrieved from: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/Highlights/Beginning_Farmers/Highlights_Beginning_Farmers.pdf

2. USDA Census of Agriculture (2012) U.S. Summary and State Data. Retrieved November, 2014, from www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/

3. Lindsey Lusher Shute, *Building a Future with Farmers: Challenges Faced by Young, American Farmers and a National Strategy to Help Them Succeed*, (Tivoli, NY: National Young Farmers Coalition, 2011), http://www.youngfarmers.org/reports/Building_A_Future_With_Farmers.pdf

