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**National Young Farmers Coalition applauds Montana House of Representatives for passage of Farmer Student Loan Bill**

*Measure would help to preserve Montana's agricultural economy and secure its food supply*

**HELENA, MT** (April 5, 2017) — The [National Young Farmers Coalition](http://www.nyoungfarmers.org), which represents America's next generation of farmers and ranchers, applauded the Montana House of Representatives for its passage of the farmer student loan bill ([HB 631](#)) this week.

“The Montana House of Representatives took a huge bipartisan step forward today in addressing student loan debt, a critical barrier facing aspiring farmers and ranchers in Montana,” said National Young Farmers Coalition Western Program Director Kate Greenberg. “The future of agriculture in Montana depends on the success of the next generation of farmers and ranchers. This legislation will help to preserve the state's agricultural economy and the security of our food supply by helping more young people enter careers in agriculture.”

Greenberg noted that Montana currently does not have enough young farmers to take over family farm and ranch operations in the state. The average age of Montana farmers is 59 years old (up from 55 in 2002). As older farmers retire over the next two decades, over 30 million acres, or 62 percent of Montana's agricultural land, will pass to new owners. But there are not enough young farmers to take over. Montana farmers over 65 outnumber farmers under 35 by a ratio of seven to one.

“By failing to address this gap, we risk furthering the consolidation of our food system, increasing permanent losses of agricultural lands, and losing a generation of land and water stewards,” said Greenberg.

Farming is a capital-intensive business to enter and beginning farmers and ranchers—like other small business owners—often see small profits or even losses in their first years of business. In 2011, the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) conducted a survey of 1,000 young farmers and found that 78% of respondents struggled with a lack of capital. A 2014 follow-up survey of 700 young farmers with student loan debt found that the average burden of student

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loans was \$35,000. Overall, NYFC has found that the burden of student loan debt can thwart an aspiring farmer's ability to purchase land or the equipment necessary to get started, or can drive them away from a career in agriculture altogether.

To address the critical shortfall of skilled young and beginning farmers and ranchers, HB 631 establishes the Montana Farmer Loan Repayment Assistance Program, which would reimburse up to half of a farmer's student loan debt over five years, with a net zero fiscal impact to the state. Each year, a council would select recent college graduates who agree to commit to operate a farm or ranch in Montana for at least five years. Representative Zach Brown (D-HD63) introduced the bill and is the lead sponsor.

“We are grateful for the bipartisan effort led by Representative Brown to support a new generation of Montana farmers and ranchers who will promote new and innovative ways to preserve our natural resources, support rural communities, and help feed the nation for generations to come,” said National Young Farmers Coalition executive director and co-founder Lindsey Lusher Shute, who is herself a young farmer. “This legislation will make farming a more viable option for young people and will attract new people into Montana's agricultural economy.”

*Committed to building a viable future for American agriculture, the [National Young Farmers Coalition \(NYFC\)](#) is an advocacy network of farmers, ranchers, and consumers working to ensure that all young farmers have the chance to succeed. Visit NYFC on the web at [www.youngfarmers.org](http://www.youngfarmers.org), and on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Instagram](#).*

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