

Why supporting farmers and farmer training is now more crucial than ever before

By Daniel Wilson

Non-profits like the Center for Land-Based Learning, which is based in Winters, Calif. and has provided farmer training and education throughout 27 counties across four programs for the better part of 25 years, are now more crucial to the future of the state and the nation's agriculture than at any time in history.

By 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicts 57,900 annual job openings on average for graduates of higher education institutions with expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources or the environment.

When combining that information with the fact that the a 2012 consensus study by the United States Department of Agriculture found that "among principal [farm] operators, 6 percent are under 35 years old, 61 percent are 35 to 64 years, and 33 percent are 65 and older," it's obvious that getting young people excited about farming and agriculture is important to our survival not only in California but in the United States. With the average age of the American farmer at about 58 years old, in the next 10 years or so, many of our farmers will retire from the field and we'll need lots of young, skilled professionals to fill those roles.

In fact, by 2050, AgCareers predicts that the world's population will hit 9 billion people. To feed, clothe and support that number of people, agriculture will become heavily important to the U.S. and large states like California, where a high number of the agricultural products consumed by Americans is produced.

In other words, filling jobs with well-trained people who can fulfill all sorts of roles on America's and California's farms is becoming dire. There were 52,862 jobs posted on AgCareers.com in 2013 but a lack of trained professionals to fulfill these roles has left the industry looking to organizations like the Center for Land-Based Learning to help train tomorrow's food growers. For example, that same year, AgCareers reported just 29,000 graduates were trained to fill the more than 50,000 jobs available.

The FARMS Leadership program provides hands-on experiences and workforce development opportunities to youth at working farms, ag-businesses and universities.

The Student and Landowner Education for Watershed Stewardship (SLEWS), engages high school students in environmental stewardship projects that enhance classroom learning, develop leadership skills and result in genuine habitat restoration. And the "Caring for our Watersheds" program is an environmental proposal writing contest for youth.

The center's bread and butter, though, is the California Farm Academy (CFA), which is a beginning farmer training, farm incubator, and apprenticeship program for adults.

The CFA was certified this year – one of the only certified farm academies in the country — and that means the training is streamlined and standardized.

In addition, future farmers in the program are held accountable for putting in enough hours in each area of farm leadership as to be able to take on their own farm or various areas of farming upon completion of their training.

Many people may not see farming jobs as appealing, but AgCareers says "whether you are looking for a company that you fit in with, a competitive salary, or you want to make a difference, the agricultural sector has such a wide variety of jobs to choose from that it is easy to find what suits you best. It's a growing field that needs new and talented employees to be ready to fill positions and be the next generation of agriculture."

With the CFA recently graduating another 21 future farmers, the Center for Land-Based Learning and its programs continue to contribute to the growth of the industry. Supporting farmers and the agriculture industry is literally vital to the survival of future generations and our programs are helping young people and adults alike realize that farming can be fun, beneficial and rewarding. Not only is farm leadership a great career choice with lots of need for diverse skillsets and abilities, it's a field where workers can feel like they are giving back to the community each and every day. For more information on the Center for Land-Based Learning and its programs, please visit us at www.landbasedlearning.org.