

**According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average farmer is 58 years old. Unfortunately, too few young people are interested in taking over the business.**



Husband and wife Richard Coon and Christine Hantelman, owners of Wokey Ranch, worry about the future of small-scale farming.

PHOTO BY MELISSA DAUGHERTY

Unless a person inherits a farm, it's extremely difficult to get started in farming, especially in California, where land prices are through the roof. In addition, farming is a capital-intensive occupation, and capital is scarce. Equipment is pricey, worker's comp is costly, and many young would-be farmers carry substantial student loan debt, making it hard for them to obtain bank loans.

It is also a complex business requiring a wide range of skills and knowledge, from accounting and marketing to soil chemistry and meteorology. Yep, the weather. Its unpredictability turns farming into an occupational crap shoot.

Monica Szczepanski, CCFM's office manager, notes that, of every 20 applicants for booth space at the local farmers' markets, only one is an actual farmer.

The growing shortage of farmers creates an "existential threat," Coon says, to the continued success of the kind of niche, small-scale farming that has led to the proliferation of "farm-to-fork" markets and transformed customers' perceptions and

expectations when it comes to food.

The increasing presence of small-scale farms and consumers' ever-increasing preference for their products has had ramifications throughout modern agriculture by offering consumers organic products they can trust to be fresh, healthful and free of toxins.

Just as important is the impact these farms have had as an alternative to corporate agriculture. They're designed to serve local markets, bypass middle men and avoid having to transport food long distances.

According to the USDA, however, the number of mid-size family farms—including those seen at farmers' markets—is shrinking and big farms are getting bigger. The number of young people taking up farming is nowhere near enough to replace the number exiting.

This is not good for the food system as a whole, nor for consumers.

**Lee Altier is a professor of plant science at Chico State and director of the Organic Vegetable Project at the University Farm.** When he arrived here in the 1980s, he says, there were only about 300 students in the College of Agriculture. Today there are about 1,000.

Most of them will graduate and go to work in agriculture, Altier says, but few—mostly those from farm families who own their land—will actually become farmers. Instead, they will work for government agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the USDA or become sales reps flogging ag products, from tractors to fertilizers. Some will become ag consultants; others will go into farm or ranch management.

Altier notes that his daughter is in that last group: She manages a bison ranch in Hot Springs, Mont.

Back at the farmers' market, a chalkboard sign in front of one of the booths indicated that it was the site of "The Kids' Farmers' Market." A gaggle of youngsters squeezed forward, lured by the ripe strawberries a CCFM volunteer was handing out.

Farming isn't an occupation; it's a calling, one that often is sparked during childhood. Many of the farmers who sell their products at farmers' markets are ex-urbanites who at some point remembered how, as children, they loved working in the family vegetable garden.

Only the kind of passion that comes from a great love of the land is sufficient to attract young people to such a difficult occupation. Many of those who heed that calling, however, are forever grateful that they did.

—ROBERT SPEER  
robertspeer@newsreview.com

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