

Funding challenges keep number of new farmers low

Tara Duggan, Special to The Chronicle

Saturday, July 23, 2011

With this report, Tara Duggan previews a three-part series of stories on her family's small organic farm in Mendocino County. The first story appears in the Home & Garden section in Sunday's Chronicle, only in print and on the iPad app.

In March, Vonita Murray broke ground on 4 acres in Woodland she calls Mariposa Valley Farm. While waiting for her tomatoes and eggplants to mature, she started selling the first heads of lettuce at the farmers' market. This week, she launched her community-supported agriculture program, offering weekly produce boxes to local subscribers.

Murray, 35, also works outside the farm to pay the bills, and her fiance works full time as an architect. "There's no way I could be a single person and try to farm, maintain a life and have a job," she said.

Murray is typical of many of today's beginning farmers - one of the 100,000 new farmers the federal government says the country needs to add in the next several years to replace its aging workforce.

Murray can't afford to buy her land, depends on outside income and didn't inherit the business. These sorts of challenges explain why few young people are going into farming, and why the average age of the American farmer has risen steadily since the 1970s to 57 today, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

With a farm family's average annual cost of living at \$47,000 and fewer than one-quarter of American farms bringing in more than \$50,000 a year, not many families can afford to stay in business. As a result, retiring farmers are selling their land to developers rather than passing down the farm to their children, resulting in a rapid loss of acreage devoted to producing food.

Usda gets involved

These statistics have sounded an alarm, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has responded with recent initiatives to encourage new farmers to get into the field.



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"If you're 80 and you're still farming, there's not a lot of years left," said Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan. "We don't want to have any more loss of farmland. We don't want to have any more loss in our ability to produce."

In 2009, the USDA created an initiative called Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food - often called KYF2 - that helps beginning farmers and ranchers access USDA loans, grants and training programs. KYF2 includes a Farm to School program that aims to increase the amount of locally grown foods in schools and provide another outlet to smaller-scale farmers. And because distribution is a big hurdle for small and midsize farmers, the USDA also just launched an online resource to help connect them to markets normally dominated by bigger players.

But the recently passed House agriculture appropriations bill for 2012 recommends significant cuts to the USDA budget, including almost \$1 billion in the conservation programs that benefit many beginning farmers. The bill also includes an amendment by Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., to eliminate KYF2, although it doesn't have its own budget. When KYF2 went into effect in 2009, several Republican senators criticized it for focusing on "hobbyist" farmers.

With ongoing budget negotiations in Washington, it's unclear how much USDA funding will be cut from regional organizations such as California FarmLink, which connects new farmers with leasing and financing opportunities thanks to a \$500,000 USDA lending fund, or the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, which runs a farm incubation program in Salinas.

"Operating loans have been really important in growing our business, from the standpoint that I don't have a father or father-in-law to sign some big note for me for ag financing," said Seth Nitschke, 35, who started his ranch in Newman (Stanislaus County) five years ago. "When you're coming from the outside, it's hard to get started."

Leased land

Nitschke founded his grass-fed beef company, Open Space Meats, after working as a buyer for large cattle companies. He began with three head of cattle and now has 300 that range over 2,000 leased acres.

While it's common for beginning farmers and ranchers to lease rather than own their land, the practice can be problematic for produce growers, especially organic ones.

When Rebecca Spector and Jason McKenney founded Purisima Greens in 1997 on 5 leased acres in Half Moon Bay, they put a lot of money and labor into transitioning the soil to organic. But when their landlord died, they had to move and start over, losing tens of thousands of dollars the process.

They eventually built up a membership roster of 100 subscribers for their boxes of produce, and sold to local restaurants and at farmers' markets. Still, they struggled to pay their bills even while Spector worked full time elsewhere.

Then, their land was put up for sale again, just when they were starting a family. Without land or housing stability, they decided to let the farm go.

"It was a very hard decision to close the business," said Spector, who now heads up the West Coast office of the Center for Food Safety. "It was a very sad time in our lives."

One organization with a track record for helping new farmers thrive is the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association. For the past 25 years, the organization has run a farm incubator program for low-income aspiring farmers in which they create business plans and then lease land at below-market rates for six to seven years.

After that, the association's partner organizations help the new farmers secure financing to lease their own land. Eighty percent of the dozens who graduate from its incubation program are still in farming five years out, said spokesman Gary Peterson.

Running track, yoga

New farmer Murray, a disabled Navy vet, has received assistance from the Farmer Veteran Coalition, USDA conservation programs and California FarmLink.

"I go to every workshop I can, and I shake hands with every person I can find," said Murray, who wants to one day install a running track and yoga studio at her Yolo County farm to encourage an overall healthy way of life.

"Honestly, I have big plans for the farm. I need to be there so I can bring these things to fruition."

E-mail comments to food@sfgchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/07/23/MNM31KCHNC.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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