



CAREERS IN AGRICULTURE

A renewed interest in farming, ranching and food business entrepreneurship is influencing the professional decisions of people young and old across the country. Farming and ranching offers opportunities to develop innovative businesses and generate income while working outside on the land. Growing and selling food, educating students, or training aspiring farmers helps producers feel a connection with the broader community. And off the farm, cutting-edge entrepreneurs are developing new food infrastructure and plotting creative ways to reach new markets.

This groundswell of interest comes on the heel of a long decline in the number of farmers and ranchers at work in America. Since 1980, our nation has lost over 200,000 farms⁹ due to retirement, low market prices, and other factors. The exodus has left many rural communities with **dwindling populations** and fragile economies. We need to reverse this trend for young members of existing farm families and bring new people into agriculture, including young people, **immigrant and refugee farmers**, military veterans and others.

For many new farmers, local markets are a logical starting place. Some are naturally drawn



FAST FACTS

- In 2009, USDA funded 29 Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development projects that trained more than 5,000 new producers in the first year. In 2010, 40 projects were funded. The projects operate in 40 states.
- Since taking office in April 2009, Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan has presented to over 25 colleges and universities across the country, helping to educate young people about the food and farm industries and opportunities to work “in the field.”

to the scale of these markets, while others see them as the first step in a scaling-up strategy. When farmers enter the local market, they may choose to locate near population centers and produce high-value crops for urban populations. Economically viable farms are a strong buffer against **development pressure** on the edge of cities, which threatens not just open

First Lady Michelle Obama visits MA’O Organic Farms in the Waianae area of Hawaii, the largest Native Hawaiian community in the world and one of the most economically challenged communities in the state. MA’O is a 24.5 acre certified organic farm that is primarily run by area youth who participate in the Youth Leadership Training (YLT) internship.



A recent Oglala Sioux Tribal Youth Summit in South Dakota celebrated National Farmers Market Week. The Oyate Omniciye - Teca Bliheceya Waecuŋ farmer's market held in the village of Red Dog (Manderson, SD) is supported by the Lakota Ranch Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program, a partner of USDA's Rural Development.

space but also our nation's capacity to produce food for a growing population.

But farming involves a lot of uncertainty, and the weather is only the beginning. New farmers frequently lack access to training and technical assistance; many struggle to get credit and gather the resources needed to purchase land and equipment. Access to land is a major challenge: the average cost of farmland has doubled nationally over the last decade.¹⁰ And finding ways to access storage, cooling, processing, and distribution infrastructure can be difficult for all farmers involved in local markets. (For more information on infrastructure barriers and projects that are overcoming them, see the [Infrastructure section](#) of the KYF Compass.)



April Jones owns and operates a 24-acre certified organic farm near Ridgefield, WA. She provides vegetables to more than 30 families every week.

ON THE GROUND: KYF AND THE NEW FACE OF LOCAL

Although not all new entrants will sell their food locally, USDA has recognized the significant role that local and regional market opportunities play for the recruitment and retention of new farm and food businesses. As part of the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative, several USDA agencies have come together to publicize opportunities and develop new resources for beginning producers and businesses selling locally. Some of USDA's work on this issue includes:

Preparing new farmers. One of the key programs supporting new farmers and ranchers, many of whom sell locally, is the [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](#) (BFRDP), administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. In 2009, USDA funded 29 BFRDP projects at organizations around the country that in turn trained more than 5,000 beginning farmers and ranchers in the first year of the grant. In 2010, 40 projects were funded. Together the



CASE STUDY

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Preserving Farmland and Growing New Farmers in Butte County, CA

Many projects funded through the **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program** train new producers to take advantage of local and regional marketing opportunities. For example, in Butte County, California, the Northern California Regional Land Trust received a grant in 2010 to help beginning farmers and ranchers increase sales in local and regional markets. In its first year, the Land Trust formed a tri-county technical advisory committee that includes county agriculture commissioners, university professors, economic development agency representatives, farmers, Land Trust staff, and farm credit personnel; conducted

six technical workshops for new farmers and ranchers on topics ranging from accessing credit to successful direct marketing; and is developing a program to match new producers with available farmland. “We were working hard to protect the region’s farmland but realized that without a new generation of farmers and a strong local food system, there would be no one to work the land, protected or not,” said Noelle Ferdon, Director of Local Food Systems for the Land Trust. “It’s our goal to bring resources to beginning farmers and ranchers so they can help protect the rich agricultural history of our region.”





Seniors from Calvert High School in Texas visit USDA as part of a senior trip sponsored by the “Ag in the Classroom” program. Acting Undersecretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services Michael Scuse spoke to students, parents and chaperons about careers at USDA.

Young farmers in Florida participate in the New and Beginning Farmers Training Program to learn skills that will help them start successful farming operations.



69 projects are located in 40 states and serve beginning farmers and ranchers across the entire nation. Training activities include webinars, conferences, on-farm field days, and work with mentor farmers; many of these activities focus on tapping into local market opportunities. Read more about BFRDP’s successes [here](#).

Providing space to share knowledge. The **Cooperative Extension Service** offers programs on the campuses of **more than 100 land-grant colleges and universities** and in county and regional offices throughout the country. They are developing tools for local producers, providing training, and helping farmers network with and learn from one another. Read more about how Extension is supporting beginning farmers engaged in local food production [on the KYF blog](#). The Cooperative Extension Service’s online system, **eXtension**, makes the technical expertise of Extension agents available to all.

USDA is also helping build the knowledge base for new farmers and the institutions that serve them by funding research efforts in the field. For more information, see the [Local Food Knowledge section](#).

Online resources are also available. The **Field Guide to the New American Foodshed**, a new website developed with funding from USDA’s Risk Management Agency, helps beginning farmers, ranchers and entrepreneurs interested in local and regional marketing find business planning tools and learn from their peers. This guide and a wealth of other resources are collected at [Start2Farm.gov](#), a curriculum and training clearinghouse for new farmers developed by USDA and the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Helping new farmers access land for local food production. 40 percent of farmers are now located in metro counties, according to USDA’s [Agricultural Resource Management Survey](#). Through its website,

CASE STUDY

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A Young Farmer Stewards the Land in New Hampshire

In New Hampshire, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping beginning farmer Meghan Bickford of Diamond B Farm in New Durham implement a number of sustainable practices through the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**. With NRCS support, Meghan established a rotational grazing plan for her herd of Belted Galloway and Angus cattle; built a ground gutter and grassed waterway to treat barnyard

runoff; and is implementing a forest stand improvement plan. Although developers are keenly interested in the farm's real estate, Meghan has instead expanded local sales through Facebook and word-of-mouth relationships, securing a year-round group of local customers dedicated to supporting the farm as a community resource and a steward of the environment.

"This farm is really a 4-H project that got out of hand," says Meghan Bickford, 22, who manages a farm in New Durham, NH. Read more about Meghan's conservation efforts with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.



Hillside Farmers Co-op in Minnesota is helping Latino farmers plan farm businesses and cooperatively market pastured poultry and other products.



blog, inter-agency collaboration and meetings with external stakeholders, KYF highlights USDA resources available to maintain farmland near cities, where producers can take advantage of nearby urban markets to increase their revenues. For example, USDA's **Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program**, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, helps secure land under pressure from development so that farms can continue to exist on the urban periphery. NRCS also supports beginning farmers, including those producing for local markets, by sharing the cost of practices to protect soil, air and water as part of the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**. Beginning farmers are eligible for a higher cost-share from NRCS to implement these practices than experienced farmers. Finally, the Farm Service Agency's **Transition Incentives Program** provides retiring farm operators with incentive payments for selling or leasing some of their expiring Conservation Reserve Program acreage to beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers who can then sustainably graze or farm the land.

Farm mentorship programs are another way to help new farmers access land. For example, in Northfield **Minnesota**, Hillside Farmers Co-op is pairing new Latino farmers with established producers who rent out their land for crop and poultry production. With the help of a 2010 **Small Socially Disadvantaged Producer Grant** from USDA Rural Development, Hillside Co-op is expanding its mentorship and training programs for new farmers and developing a cooperative business plan to develop local free-range poultry markets.

Making access permanent through farm ownership. Through USDA's Farm Service Agency, beginning farmers and ranchers qualify for specific **farm loans** designed to assist people with limited farming experience in



MISSISSIPPI'S WINSTON COUNTY SELF-HELP COOPERATIVE USES A MENTORSHIP MODEL TO TRAIN YOUTH IN FARMING.

[Click here to watch the video](#)



Job Corps participants build a raised bed for a people's garden in Laona, Wisconsin.



purchasing their own operations. In Unionville, VA, young farmers Zach Lester and Georgia O'Neal had spent thousands of hours and dollars improving the soil and caring for a leased farm. They knew that if the lease came up, they would lose the farm and all of the hard work that went into it. So in 2009, USDA's Farm Service Agency provided them with financing to purchase land of their own and move the vegetable operation to their property. They also financed the purchase of equipment and a seasonal high tunnel. Mr. Lester and Ms. O'Neal now use high tunnels and greenhouses to extend their growing season to provide fresh produce at farmers' markets across the Washington, DC area. For more examples of how FSA is working with young and beginning farmers selling locally, see the [KYF Map](#).

Helping young people find non-farm work in the agricultural sector. Local and regional food systems, like all of agriculture, offer jobs for young people in more than just farming. Some find opportunities to innovate in business by getting involved in storing, processing, marketing, distributing or selling local food. Others are drawn to public service—a critical need given that a large portion of USDA employees will retire over the next few years. In Utah, a young Navajo woman named [Semira Crank](#) joined USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to help local farmers and ranchers protect the environment. (Watch a video of Semira discussing her work [here](#).)

The Forest Service runs 28 [Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers](#) around the country, educating and training young people in a variety of vocational trades. Watch a [video](#) of Job Corps students judging a "White House Top Chef" competition at the USDA cafeteria using healthy local foods from DC farmers' markets. In partnership with the American Forest



USDA JOB CORPS TOP CHEF!

[Click here to watch the video](#)





Foundation, the Forest Service also supports the **GreenSchools!** Program, which is designed to build healthy, safe, and environmentally friendly school learning environments. Many *GreenSchools!* have established school gardens, involving students and local communities in growing and cooking their own healthy food. Some schools have even donated the fresh produce they grow to local food pantries.

Young people around the country have learned about these and other opportunities while boosting their knowledge of the agricultural sector thanks to Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan's college tour. Since taking office in April 2009, the Deputy has presented to over 25 colleges and universities across the country, helping to educate young people about the food and farm industries and opportunities to work "in the field."

Through the KYF initiative and other efforts, USDA is helping to expand resources for beginning farmers, ranchers and food entrepreneurs specifically interested in local and regional markets. KYF also helps USDA meet the broader goal of getting young Americans more involved in agriculture and connected to where their food comes from. See projects supported by USDA to develop new food and farm businesses on the **KYF Map**.