

Time Magazine recently published an extensive article entitled, "Want to Make More Than a Banker? Become a Farmer!" It features two Nebraska farm operations and, as the headline suggests, highlights the recent trend of strong commodity prices, high production yields, and the resulting benefits for farmers and some rural economies.

While the agricultural sector is certainly one of the bright spots of the American economy and has helped states like Nebraska remain economically resilient during a national downturn, agriculture as an occupation and industry still faces some stiff challenges. Primary among these is demographics: the aging of the American farmer and the dearth of young people pursuing agriculture as a career.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the average age of the American farmer is now 57 years old. The average age of a Nebraska farmer is 56. Meanwhile, only six to eight percent of farmers nationwide are under the age of 35. In the next 10 to 15 years, a large number of farmers will be ready to transition into retirement. Who will take their place?

Legislation I recently introduced with Rep. Tim Walz of Minnesota seeks to address this concern. The *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act*, H.R. 3236, would ready a new generation of American ag producers by modifying and building upon existing farm programs to help overcome the steep financial burdens of setting up an agricultural business.

The bill includes a set of practical policy reforms and enhancements designed for inclusion in the 2012 Farm Bill. It seeks to break down some of the barriers to entry for beginning farmers and ranchers. It improves access to farm credit for young producers, encourages participation in innovative and cost-saving conservation practices, increases technical training and educational opportunities, and gives priority to beginning farmers who pursue grant support for value-added initiatives. In doing so, it also recognizes the importance and promise of emerging market opportunities, such as locally and organically raised foods within regional foods systems, to young ag entrepreneurs.

Drawing young people to agricultural careers will help not only to sustain America's high levels of agricultural production, it will promote rural development and revitalization. The fate of our small towns and rural places is directly tied to the health and diversity of the agricultural

economy. Bringing new participants and landowners into agriculture will help address the trend of increased consolidation and concentration in farm markets, which has long been a factor in rural depopulation.

Exciting new opportunities exist today in agricultural export markets, value-added goods and local foods systems, conservation, and energy generation. And many young people possess the entrepreneurial drive necessary to establish and maintain successful farm operations. It is important that our farm policies recognize the critical need to encourage new interest in agriculture and develop a new generation of American farmers and ranchers. I believe the *Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act* is a good first step in this direction.