

Do we have enough young farmers?

Canada has lost 70 per cent of the farmers in its under-35 category in just 25 years

There are encouraging signs all across the country. At the University of Manitoba's School of Agriculture convocation this spring, 58 graduates took home their two-year diplomas. At Ridgetown Campus of the University of Guelph in Ontario, 267 crossed the stage in late May, and at Olds College in Alberta, another 81 diplomas were handed out to its agricultural management graduates.

Not all will become farmers, of course, but an astonishing percentage say it's what they're dreaming of.

For instance, 80 per cent of Manitoba's graduates are looking to farm, according to Michelle Rogalsky, school director. Many have their plans clearly mapped out, she says. Some are headed home to farm with family. Others have brand new farm ventures in the making.

Most already think of themselves as farmers, and some no doubt counted themselves in as farm operators in Canada's 2016 Census of Agriculture.

It's why that census's totals look like good news too. For the first time since 1991, Manitoba saw its share of young farm operators (those between 18 and 35) rise a couple of percentage points — to comprise just over 10 per cent of all farm operators. This gives the province Canada's largest proportion of farm operators under 35 years of age, and the second-youngest farm population overall at 53.8 years. (Quebec has the youngest average age at 52.9 years).

In fact, Manitoba's slight increase in young farmers was mirrored nationally with a three per cent increase in the total number of young farm operators across the country in 2016 — the first increase since 1991. This occurred even as the total number of Canada's farms dropped by another 5.9 per cent and we lost another 7.5 per cent of farm operators.

The rise made headlines, based on the proportion of young farmers climbing to just over nine per cent of the total farm population.

But still, isn't nine per cent just nine per cent? Is it enough?

And, if we should be worried, how worried should we be?

Put any two farmers in a room to debate questions

like that and you're bound to get different answers, says 33-year-old Elm Creek, Man. grain and oilseed producer Colin Penner, who also teaches in the agricultural diploma program at University of Manitoba's School of Agriculture and co-chairs the Manitoba Young Farmers Committee with Keystone Agricultural Producers. He farms with his parents and seeded his own first crop in 2008.

Penner's not sure exactly what contributed to Manitoba's small rise in its young farmer population, but like many others across the country, he feels the good years immediately after 2008 played a role.

"I don't want to say it follows the price in grain," Penner says, "but you do see gaps in the demographics of farmers based on how things are going in agriculture."

High land prices and volatile grain markets are big hurdles, he says, but other factors come into the decision as well, like what children hear from their parents about the outlook for farming, and whether they think farming will be a good life.

The Manitoba Young Farmers Committee is part of the nation-wide Canadian Young Farmers Forum (CYFF), which links provincial organizations and their young membership bases.

To probe their thinking, CYFF this spring posed a series of questions to 60 CYFF members about the state of young farmers in Canada.

To the question of "are there enough" young farmers, 80 per cent of CYFFers are emphatic. They shout "no."

And while they may not question the national census, half of our respondents also say there's no way that nine per cent of farmers in their respective areas are under 35.

Justin Williams is one. Williams is the chair of the CYFF and the eighth generation of his family to farm the picturesque countryside of Prince Edward County, Ont. Having turned 30 this spring, and working with his father on the family's dairy and cash crop farm, Williams says the numbers of young farmers have certainly dwindled province wide. There are currently just 6,610 under 35 among Ontario's total 70,470 farm operators.

Their small numbers are also evident in another young farmer organization he participates in — Junior Farmers Association of Ontario.





In the mid-1970s JFAO was a going concern, with over 7,000 members in well over 100 local clubs and county associations across agro-Ontario, but their numbers dropped in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with a declining overall provincial farm population.

It leaves Williams feeling fortunate to have a fairly substantial age peer group around him.

"I'm pretty lucky," he says. "Within probably 30 minutes of here there'd be 10 or more people I went to college with that I can call up when I need help or have questions."

He doesn't hesitate to offer his own view on the question of "enough" young farmers, though. "I don't think there are," he says, adding that he believes farm communities are better off when there's a whole range of ages in them, including younger people.

"Then you're always able to learn things from each other. I think it's good to have a mix of younger and older people working in agriculture, able to share their knowledge, and able to just talk over things."

“It’s no fun when you’re the only one out on the tractor,” says Manitoba’s Colin Penner

LARGE, LARGER, LARGEST

To 28-year-old Nic Weber near Waterloo, Ont., the agriculture of the future seems certain to include fewer farms and fewer farmers of any age.

Weber is the seventh generation of his family on their small beef and sheep farm, and he's also president of Ontario's young farmer organization. With each passing year, he says, he and his family see the countryside and farm community around them disappear to urban development.

"What was once a 100-acre farm is now a development property with subdivisions on it," Weber says. The farms that are left are consolidating, too, and there are fewer farmers around.

"There's a lot less of the typical 100-acre family farms and more of a family corpora-

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Justin Williams and wife Keturah Breckon.

We've seen this before

Canada has experienced peaks in the proportion of young farmers in its farm population before. In part, it's linked to the cycle of 30-year farm careers.

Retired Statistics Canada ag economist Ray Bollman says what happened in 2016 has certainly occurred in the past, too.

Now a research affiliate with the Rural Development Institute in Brandon, Man., Bollman says that when statisticians look at long-term trendlines in Canadian agriculture, they find a peak in the percentage of young farmers occurs roughly every 30 years.

Probably, that's related to lifespan, Bollman says. Across the years, farmers have generally been in charge of the farm for 30 years from when they inherit it until they pass it along to the next generation.

Bollman observed such peaks in the young farmer population census data through most of the 1900s, with high points in 1921, 1951 and 1981.

There was a statistical peak in 1991, too, the year Statistics Canada began allowing up to three farm operators per farm on the questionnaire.

Bollman says that based on what he'd seen in the previous 100 years, he'd predicted a peak again in 2011. But the peak, when it came, was actually five years later, probably an indicator this present generation of older farmers is farming a few years longer than in the past.

“I’m pretty lucky,” says Ontario’s Justin Williams. He has 10 young farmers within 30 minutes to call on. But for more and more young farmers, isolation is a serious concern

tion owning what would have been three farms now,” he says. He’s not entirely clear what the future holds for himself.

Weber currently splits his time farming with his family and working as a parts counter sales representative at a local agricultural dealership. Meanwhile, all that creeping urban development contributes to pushing the price of farm land through the roof.

“Where our farm sits we are in prime development area and land prices are a lot higher than they would be in other parts of the province. They are averaging between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per acre.

“As a young farmer in this day and age, it’s rather hard for me to actually own a farm,” he says, adding, “It’s becoming a common theme.”

But it isn’t all gloom. Weber also sees an upside for his generation. It’s their excellent job prospects.

“We are maybe half an hour from the University of Guelph which has one of the larger agricultural programs in Canada, and for every student out of the program there’s one to two jobs waiting for them ag-related.”

That corresponds with other findings of the 2016 census related to the younger producer: they are much more likely to work off farm than their older peers. Nearly 60 per cent of both young women and men on the farm reported working off the farm compared to one third of those aged 55 years and over.

THE TRANSITION SHORTFALL

All that off-farm work is how many young farmers are trying to reduce some of their financial exposure, and how they’re meeting their living expenses until their farms begin to pay.

Still, access to capital and financing, plus the high price of land are huge hurdles for young producers, as are the number of producers retiring without a plan to transition the farm to new ownership.

Christie Young is founder of FarmLINK.net, a national land listing online platform that connects Canadian farm seekers with farmland owners. One of its goals is to support a new generation of farmers, and Young definitely thinks more priority needs to be placed on supporting younger farmers.

FarmLINK.net has a lot more “farm seekers” than those with land to transfer on their books right now, says Young. The problem is a combination of a disconnect between those still farming and those wanting to get started, and too many landowners not thinking ahead or starting succession planning early enough, she says.

Farm owners often need to sell their properties in order to retire, and the next generation can’t afford to buy them. It’s part of the reason why farms are getting sold to developers for paving

More female farmers

The 2016 census showed not only a small increase in the share of young producers. The proportion of farmers who are women is also increasing over time, too.

Almost three-quarters of Canada's farm operators were male (71.3 per cent) but there's been a small increase in the proportion of women making daily decisions on the farm, too, with the proportion of agricultural operations with only female operators also increasing from 5.6 per cent to 7.2. This is a shift from 1991 when 64.7 per cent of operations had only male operators and 3.9 per cent of operations had only female operators.

In 2016, 32.7 per cent of agricultural operations had at least one male and one female operator, up from 31.4 per cent in 1991.

Notably, young female farm operators are also more likely to pursue an education in agriculture than a couple of decades ago, too.

In 2016, this group was nearly twice as likely than 20 years earlier to report having earned university-level education focused in agriculture. About 20 per cent of young female farm operators now report taking agriculture-related studies compared with about one in every dozen women farmers 40 or older.

Manitoba dairy producer Samantha Van Hulle, 22, is a good example of that educated young woman beginning her farm career. She is one of the University of Manitoba's 2019 agricultural diploma graduates, now returning this summer to operate the family's dairy farm near Lake Francis, Man., with her husband and parents.

Van Hulle said she initially thought she'd become a nurse and took some courses to enter that program when she started university.

"Then I just had a complete switch," she says. "That was just really not what I wanted to do."

Van Hulle knows exactly why farming is her future now, and credits her parents for helping her make that choice. She and her two sisters were schooled in the farm business from day one so have had a thorough understanding of it, she says.

"They showed us all sides of it," she says. "They tried to tell us the good and the bad so that we knew what we were getting into."

Young farms and risk

Farm organizations are definitely worried about the challenges young producers are facing, say their leaders. It's plainly evident that there's a lot of grey hair at their farm meetings nowadays, says Todd Lewis, president of Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan (APAS).

APAS membership was so concerned about it, the group put together a new committee in 2017 to look at the policy needs of young producers, plus a mentorship and leadership program five years ago.

That committee has been developing a variety of policy proposals towards providing the best possible conditions for new entrants, Lewis says, adding that tax barriers paid during intergenerational transfers is one of APAS's big concerns.

Another major concern is how exposed the younger producer is when things take a dive in agriculture.

"Agriculture has been profitable and so we've seen people come back to the farm," says Lewis. "But they're the most vulnerable to downturns in the economy if they don't have some backing behind them."

"Certainly our business risk management programs need to be improved and perhaps some of those a little bit tailored more specifically to new entrants and young producers."

Yet, despite the hurdles there is evidently huge interest among younger people to farm and agriculture is attractive to a smart, talented next generation, he stresses.

"I think a healthy agricultural industry will attract young people and that's what we've got to strive for."

"As long as we can have profitable agriculture, and people can make money they'll find ways to become involved."



with houses and strip malls, and why larger farms are consolidating.

"I know some farmers need to buy more land and grow their business, and it's not that we don't have the farms being bought by farmers," Young says. "It's that the numbers of farmers are decreasing, and the ability for new farmers to come in is decreasing. The opportunities become smaller."

One of her own big concerns is what that means for the agricultural community longer term and how it speaks for itself. "People are already so disconnected as to where food comes from and it's one per cent

of the population now," she says. "See that shrink, and it will be an even smaller voice for broader public discourse."

NOT ENOUGH ENTREPRENEURS, PERIOD

Others also say lack of succession planning is a huge part of the issue, with a farm population steadily aging.

Abe Toews, a chartered financial consultant with Beyond Wealth Consulting Inc. in Regina and chair of the Financial Advisors Association of Canada, says he doesn't think Canada has enough young

5,385 young beef producers

The beef industry is keeping a very close watch on its own young farmer numbers. What they're seeing is steady decline.

There are about 60,000 beef farms in Canada deriving more than half their income from beef production, but as the last census showed, of the 84,740 farm operators running them, just 5,385 are under the age of 35.

Half of all beef cattle farm operators are aged 55 or older, predominately male, and sole operators.

But recently the cattle industry's numbers have seen a slight turn for the better. There was a slightly larger share of younger operators found among beef producers in the last census, too, with cattle farms with operators under 35 found to be up a couple of percentage points to 10.7 per cent in 2016.

They're working hard to support that next generation because it's key to their sector's future growth, says Emily Ritchie, who is the Canadian Cattlemen's Association's youth leadership co-ordinator, supporting its mentorship program and the Young Cattlemen's Council to develop industry leadership among its young operators.

"Having younger generations come in brings diversity and new ideas and more strength for each operation," says Ritchie.

Their young farmer numbers are small, but Ritchie says the numbers may not tell the whole story either.

"It's a financially challenging industry to get into for sure. But I think there are a lot of young people trying to get in in different ways. They just may not be actively showing up (in census data) as yet," she says.

And while their younger entrants aren't in the high numbers "the people who are coming in are going to be a very very strong foundation for the next generation of cattle producers," she says. The more who succeed, the better for everyone, she adds.

"We're stronger when there's more of us."

“It’s a problem,” agrees financial advisor Abe Toews. “We just don’t have enough entrepreneurs to take over.”

farmers either, although the demographics in agriculture aren't so different from those related to business in general.

According to a report released last year by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, three quarters of Canadian business owners expect to exit their business before 2022, but finding a suitable successor or buyer is the main hurdle for over half (56 per cent) of them.

Likewise, agriculture is on the verge of a major transition from one generation to the next. The average age of a Canadian farmer is now 55 but just 8.4 per cent of all farms across Canada reported having a written succession plan in the last Census of Agriculture. Only 4.9 per cent of sole proprietorships, which comprise just over half of all Canadian farms (51.7 per cent) had a written plan.

Those are worrisome numbers, says Toews. What complicates everything is the timing of those deciding to start transferring assets, he says. Farm business advisors regularly see clients only ready to start succession planning in their senior years. By then, they already have middle-aged children.

"Grandpa figures it might be now time to pass on the farm, but the problem is it really should be skipping a generation and going to the grandkids, not the children. The children are already in their 50s."

Too often, says Toews, both the children and grandchildren have had to choose off-farm professions and can't come back to the farm.

"It's a problem," said Toews. "We just don't have enough young entrepreneurs in general to take over."

It's frustrating too because there can be solutions. Toews says expansion of the farm is how other farm families make it possible for their younger kin to become the next generation to farm.

"We have a number of clients that are in joint ventures with their children," he says. "They're growing two operations side by side with the intention that the children's part will grow over time and eventually take over the whole operation."

AT FARM CREDIT CANADA

Farm Credit Canada (FCC) sees itself as a key player in supporting young farmers. In addition to lending programs such as its Young Farmer and Transition loans, it supports the Canadian 4-H program, CYFF and the Cattlemen's Young Leaders Mentorship program and others.

FCC's vice-president and chief agricultural economist J.P. Gervais says it's important to see that Canada's aging farm population is linked to the overall Canadian population. But there's more to it than that.

What's worrisome is that so few farmers have plans in the works to transfer ownership to a new generation, he says. Overall, he says, "92 per cent of farms don't have a transition plan... That's spectacular in a not-so-good way."

FCC is placing increasing emphasis through developing specialists to help farm owners work on those plans, as well as offering loan programs directed at young producers.

Gervais says we can't assume we know whether the structure of the industry will remain the same in future. What he does see is new possibilities for farm operators to do things differently.

We are already seeing a more diverse agriculture emerging and that does bode well for the next generations, he says.

"The relationship between Canadians and their food is different now than it was 10 or 15 years ago," he says. "I think that opens up possibilities for young producers and young operators, and not just young, but operators in general to launch into different business segments. It's not just one model like 25 years ago. Go big to be successful... that still makes sense for some farm operators. But there's also this influence of new farmers and new farms that are trying to serve different segments of the food demand which is more high value, more specific characteristics, embodied in the farm product. I do think that's why you're seeing the number of smaller farms increase."

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A lonely place

Today's young farmers know the countryside is a very different place than the one their parents, and certainly their grandparents knew. Rural Canada is emptier. Where there were once four or five or more farms, today there's just one.

"That's pretty sad to see those farms just gone," says Manitoba's Colin Penner. "There's not even a tree on the edge of the field anymore. It's just that bump on the field that used to be someone's farm."

Is the farm also a lonelier place than it used to be?

There is one advantage for today's younger farmers on those bigger farms. They're connected across wider distances by the same technology so many of their parent's generation complain about. It's social media. There may not be as many younger families in physical farm communities, but for these young farmers, social media has been a game changer.

In the CYFF poll, 75 per cent of young farmers said it is their primary vehicle for interacting with other farmers.

About half (45 per cent) told the survey it's "extremely important" to have other farmers the same age to interact with, underscoring the fact that lifestyle and social considerations are still key success factors for today's youth.

It shows up, too, in a University of Manitoba research project called Becoming a Young Farmer: Young People's Pathways into Farming.

The study is exploring what motivates a younger generation to farm.

"That came up a lot,"

says Hannah Bihun, a young farmer herself, and a geography graduate student at the university who conducted interviews for the study funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Canada Insight grant. The research is in final stages and will include insights gleaned from both Canadian and international interviews. Young farmers in China, India and Indonesia were also included.

"People talked about feeling socially isolated, or physically isolated on their farm," says Bihun. "A lot of the younger people said the nearest neighbour is 20 miles away because the farms around them are bigger and bigger. And there's less people to connect with in the nearest town, too."



“We need to revise our strategy,” says young farmer Hannah Bihun

SKILLS THAT MATTER

Given all the changes we're seeing in agriculture, retired agricultural Statistics Canada statistician Ray Bollman says he thinks it is their skills, and not the age of farmers, that matter most.

Modern farm's management teams need a mix of skills and these are distributed across operators of all ages, Bollman says.

If commercial farms are moving to a corporate structure with family and non-family members responsible for various sub-enterprises within the farm enterprise, then maybe the optimal structure would include some 50-year-old and some 60-year-old and some 70-year-old operators with experience in many technical areas of plant science, animal husbandry, strategic management, analysis of big data and accounting, Bollman says.

But the farm also needs the insight that comes from a new generation that is more plugged into how agriculture and the country as a whole are evolving.

As one young farmer commented in the CYFF survey "I don't need young people in particular to interact with. I just need successful and knowledgeable people."

As for whether the under-35 numbers will drop over time, Bollman won't try to guess. But he does point to the trend showing a continuous decline in the number of self-employed farmers of all ages, yet a relatively constant number of paid employees on farms.

There were many more candid and insightful thoughts shared by contributors to the CYFF survey including that a robust job market for people with skills and training in agriculture helps explain why young people are tempted away from the farm, and the increasing efficiency of farm machinery explains why they aren't needed as badly at home.

Others CYFF respondents said farmers need to earn a better living than they do to keep attracting a next generation. "That's why so many young people have left farming."

"What does the future hold?" another asked. "I guess robots can do it all but if, for some reason they can't, we need farmers to produce our food."

And even if they can, this respondent said, "We need farmers to have innovative ideas about food production. We need new blood to come up with new ideas, new

visions. If we don't produce our food in house, then we have to rely on imports, and that can't be good!"

Back in Elm Creek, Penner says it's hard to say what the answer really is to the question "do we have enough" young farmers.

On the one hand, there's no shortage either of those ready and able to farm the land, or of farm assets, if and when they come up for sale, he says.

"Someone is going to be there to farm the land, whether it's a young farmer, an old farmer, a small farmer or big farmer," he says.

"But it would be nice to see more young people out there and willing to try different and unique things. And I think for small communities the fact that farms are getting bigger and there's fewer farm families, that's a negative. We've seen the community shrink. And it's no fun when you're the only one out seeding on the tractor."

Losses, losses, losses

Yes, Canada's rural population is very different than even a generation ago. There were 390,875 farm operators (of all ages) farming in 1991. By 2016 that had dropped to 271,935.

Among them, there were 77,910 under the age of 35 in 1991. Today that cohort numbers just 24,850.

Young farmer and grad student Hannah Bihun says she thinks Canadians should be very worried about what such a precipitous drop in the young farmer population — and in such a short period of time — will mean for agriculture longterm.

"We've lost 70 per cent of farmers under 35 since the 1990s," she says.

The University of Manitoba Becoming a

Young Farmer research project is looking into what's working against more young people actively taking up farming.

The study is asking young farmers why they chose to farm, how they're getting in, and the challenges they face.

Bihun said her own view on the question of "enough" is that there most certainly aren't enough young farmers in the countryside, and Canadian agriculture needs to make room for more, not simply see farms continue to get larger and squeeze out the rest.

"If having really large-scale specialized farms means we can't have other small farms, I think we need to revise our strategy," Bihun says.

"We need to have a diversity of agriculture."