

Generation gap a tough row to hoe for families

- Children pursue other careers rather than follow parents' farming footsteps

By Erin Sherbert
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Maybe in 15 years, Michael Stonebarger will come back to help run his family farm in Brentwood.

But for now, the 19-year-old viticulture and agriculture business major at Cal Poly is planning to go to law school after graduation -- a choice that will guarantee him a better income.

Although his heart is in farming, the Brentwood native said he would rather practice law and save some money before becoming a full-time farmer.

"If you have a bad year, you are not guaranteed to make anything -- you can go into debt real fast," Stonebarger said.

Attracting younger generations to take over farm operations at a time when many farmers are coping with urbanization and economic struggles is a growing concern among East County farmers.

The average age of farmers in East County increased from 55 to 57 from 1997 to 2002, according to the 2007 Contra Costa/Brentwood Agricultural Marketing Report.

At the same time, according to the report, there has not been a significant influx of young farmers in Contra Costa County.

Growers say East County's diverse crops and rich soils make it an ideal region for farming. Yet without the profit potential, the number of farmers in Contra Costa County will continue to decline, according to the report.

Mary Lentzner, 63, who owns a cattle grazing ranch south of Antioch, said she always discouraged her three children from taking over her cattle ranch, mostly because there was little or no money to be made.

"It's a nice place to live, but it's not a living. You have to have something else on the side," Lentzner said. "The way the laws are and difficulty with regulations, it seems like it's difficult for anyone to get started around here."

Although county officials say they are working to create more economic opportunities for local farmers, growers in the region say there also needs to be an investment in programs that introduce young farmers to the area.

"I'd like to see programs to get young farmers and rebuild the ag community with young people who have a passion for growing," said Al Courchesne, a local fruit farmer. "There are all kinds of possibilities."

What local governments can do is create loan programs and other financial incentives to help young farmers interested in coming to Contra Costa County, said Steve Schwartz, executive director of California FarmLink, a nonprofit organization that works to help transfer farms from one generation to the next.

It's also important that older farmers serve as mentors to younger generations, coaching them on the ups and downs of the business, Schwartz said.

Meanwhile, other farmers are working to revive an old organization dedicated to young farmers. Cathy Wolfe, 28, came back to Brentwood after college to work on her family's fruit farm, located in the agriculture core.

But Wolfe has struggled to revive the local chapter of the Young Farmers and Ranchers organization, a national group of farmers ages 18 to 35. So far, there are two members, including her, Wolfe said.

"It's a reflection of the state of agriculture in Contra Costa County," Wolfe said. "I think the writing is on the wall -- you can't farm and expect to profit."

Reach Erin Sherbert at 925-779-7139 or esherbert@cctimes.com.

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