

New Mexico Agricultural Workforce Development Program

A resilient agriculture sector in New Mexico relies on creating and retaining a well-trained and highly skilled agricultural workforce. Currently, our state's agriculture industry lacks a sufficiently trained and ready labor pool. Young people are struggling to break into agriculture, and with most producers nearing retirement, there are not enough young, trained growers to keep the industry strong. Agriculture value-added and food-related businesses have also reported serious needs for well-trained employees. Preparing the next generation of the agriculture workforce for long-term success is an issue New Mexico must address now.

New Mexico First in partnership with the National Young Farmers Coalition propose to run legislation to establish the **New Mexico Agricultural Workforce Development Program**. The program would help attract and retain new entrants to New Mexico's agricultural industry by expanding hands-on training opportunities for aspiring farmers and ranchers. The program would do the following:

- Allow the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) to create the Agricultural Workforce Development Program to assist agricultural businesses with the costs of hiring interns and expand training opportunities for aspiring farmers and ranchers.
- Provide eligible agricultural businesses up to 50 percent of the costs to employ an intern, including wages, fixed expenses, and other costs. The agriculture business must provide an intern with at least 130 hours of work experience over no more than 1 year. The intern may not be a current or former employee or relative of the business owner or operator.
- Allow NMDA to develop the criteria for selecting an agricultural business for participation in the program and guidelines for internships funded through the program to help ensure the intern receives valuable work experience.

Legislation would initially request \$250,000 for the program to devote to both staff time and internship awards. Based on funding, NMDA can set targets for number of internships funded, employment hours and other contributions to measure program success.

Why an Agricultural Workforce Development Program?

New Mexico's agricultural workforce is older on average than at any other time in history. National data from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) suggests the rate of farmer and rancher retirement could very well out-pace the rate of new entrants into the industry (USDA, 2012 Census of Agriculture). The average age of a New Mexico farm operator in 2012 was 61 years (USDA), which is higher than the national average age of 58. Over 60% of New Mexico's farmers are set to retire over the next two decades (USDA). In contrast, the most recent data shows that only 3% of New Mexico's farmers are under the age of 35 (USDA). This gap in grower ages indicates the next ten years are a critical time period for passing on farming and ranching knowledge to the next generation.

More young people are entering the agriculture industry in New Mexico. New Mexico saw a 5.8% increase in young farmers entering the agriculture industry from 2007 to 2012, demonstrating that young people are showing an interest in agricultural careers. Still, less than 17% of farmers in New Mexico are under the age of 45, and New Mexico farmers over the age of 55 outnumber young farmers and ranchers under 35 by 8 to 1 (USDA). Aspiring farmers in New Mexico face many barriers in entering the agriculture industry including limited access to farmland, rising land prices, difficulties accessing capital, high startup costs for new farms, student loan debt, and limited opportunities to gain hands-on farming experience.

A workforce development program will expand agricultural training opportunities for aspiring farmers and ranchers. Agriculture is a knowledge-intensive and experience-driven occupation. Many aspiring farmers and ranchers entering the field today are first-generation farmers, those who come from non-farming backgrounds and may not have had the opportunity to acquire critical farming skills and techniques through hands-on experience. Internships are one of the best ways to gain useful hands-on skills and knowledge about running a successful farm/ranch business. Interns gain valuable knowledge in production planning, planting, tending, harvesting, record keeping and other aspects of the business. Internships also provide first-generation farmers and ranchers with an opportunity to network with more established producers; potentially opening up pathways to more secure land tenure arrangements and marketing opportunities.

An agriculture workforce development program can help to support existing and new efforts. Several groups in New Mexico have begun to respond to the need to train the next generation of farmers and ranchers. New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service, New Mexico Cattle Growers, the Institute of American Indian Arts, National Young Farmers Coalition and Rocky Mountain Farmers Union are just some of the organizations working to build agricultural career-development opportunities throughout our state. However, most of these groups currently rely on grant funding or volunteers. A state-run program could help to bolster these efforts and expand their reach, while ensuring the financial burden of hiring an intern does not rest solely on growers.

A workforce development program will expand a trained agricultural workforce pool. With a growing gap between retiring and aspiring farmers and ranchers, there is an immediate need to build a skilled agricultural workforce for the future. Without a well-trained and highly skilled agricultural workforce, New Mexico's agriculture industry could struggle to meet growing consumer demand for New Mexico products and remain competitive within a globalized food system. The Agriculture Workforce Development Program will help address this labor gap, providing established producers with temporary workforce needs and cultivating a skilled labor pool for the agriculture sector. The bill will also benefit farmers and ranchers with limited resources who may have more difficulty covering the costs of hiring seasonal employees.