‘The young are not going into it ... because nobody can make a living at it.’

Farmers look to future

When Wilson Viator got into farming in 1972, the average farmer in the United States was 45 years old. By 2007, it had risen to 57.

“The young are not going into it ... because nobody can make a living at it,” he said.

The 2007 Census of Agriculture, released recently by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, attests to the aging of America’s farmers.

Ag census figures reveal mixed bag for agriculture

The census also suggests that:

- The number of farms in Louisiana increased by 10% since 2002, compared with a 4% increase nationwide.
- Farm operators have become more diverse in the past five years, but whites dominate in Louisiana.
- The majority of U.S. farms are small operations.

Farmers who followed their parents into the trade say volatile production costs, as well as insecticides and fertilizer, are making it tougher to make a living.

In Louisiana, the census suggests 11,583 farms produced less than $1,000 in sales in 2007.

“With the economy, people are trying to sell in a year.”

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Harry Bowles, 31, grows corn, wheat and soybeans and raises cattle on about 1,000 acres in and around Carencro, the same amount of land his father, Sidney Bowles Jr., farmed 20 years ago.

"I started helping my dad when I was 11 or 12," he said. "It got in my blood."

But he's finding it harder and harder to make a living at farming the way his father did and the way his mother's dad did. Volatile production costs make it difficult, Bowles said. While fuel prices dropped in the past year, seed, fertilizer and insecticides all increased.

Large farms of 5,000 acres or more can take advantage of the economies of scale, spreading costs across more acreage. A small farmer cannot, he said.

Urbanization in Lafayette Parish also is putting the squeeze on farmers. Bowles said he's lost farmland to developments, forcing him to seek out a patchwork of smaller fields instead of 1,000 acres adjacent to his home farm.

But Bowles has learned from his father; earning a degree in agriculture, like his dad. And he has no intention of giving up the farm.

"I like the feeling of accomplishment. You raise a crop, see it through to harvest," he said. "I know that what I'm doing helps feed everybody."

Meanwhile, Viator, 59, who doubles as Youngsville's mayor when he's not farming sugar cane, winter wheat, grain and crawfish, is trying to keep his son, Dwayne, 33, in the ever-challenging farm business.

"He's got a college degree just like a lot of young people and he's looking at classmates in other lines of business bringing in 60, 100, 130,000 dollars a year and only putting a shirt on their back to go to work, and he's having to invest in equipment and crop loans and hope the good Lord sends him a good crop," Viator said.

Sugar cane earns farmers about 18 cents a pound, the same price as 20 years ago, Viator said.

"Farming is one of the few industries where the markets dictate what you get for a commodity rather than you," Dutile said.

If you buy something retail, the store sets the price. When a farmer takes his crop to market, the buyer sets the price, he explained.

A farmer's income has remained the same, but his costs are rising.

"That's one reason I see the number of middle-sized family farms going down and the age of farmers going up," Dutile said. "It's a lot more volatile than it used to be and it's so high risk, especially in Louisiana, when you have a good crop and you can have everything destroyed overnight."