Farms await a NEW generation

Most land will change hands in next two decades

By Jessica Goff
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About 70 percent of U.S. farmland will “change hands” within the next two decades, the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggested a few years ago. America’s farmers are aging, and with about 52 percent of the country’s land comprising small farms and ranches, it will be up to new generations of farmers to keep the industry growing.

Here in Acadiana, it has become harder and harder to find young people interested in farming, said Ricky Gonsoulin, Iberia Parish president for the Louisiana Farm Bureau. “Who could blame them?” he added.

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“I am very concerned about the amount of the young people that are getting into agriculture, specifically the row-crop business,” Gonsoulin, 47, said. “Way back when you had several young people getting out of college or trade school and getting into this business to make a living. Now the price and production costs are rising, the commodity prices are falling. It’s a challenge. Your back’s against the wall.”

Gonsoulin’s family has been farming sugar cane for generations, which has put them at an advantage, he said. New farmers just breaking into the business must rely on hefty bank loans to get started.

Longtime rice farmer and Evangeline Parish Farm Bureau president Richard Fontenot, 44, said the cost to start a 1,000-acre row-crop farm, which is a relatively small business, could range from $500,000 to $1 million.

“A new tractor alone costs about $200,000. Pre-owned equipment can cost in the $150,000 range,” Fontenot said.

And that, Gonsoulin said, doesn’t include land.

“If you don’t have a parent or an in-law that is currently farming where you can inherit the farm or agree to terms to buy the farm out, it’s almost impossible to get a loan to go into business as a new farmer,” Gonsoulin said.

C.R. “Rusty” Cloutier, president and CEO of MidSouth Bank, said his company offers loans for agriculture, but seldom gets new farmers.

That doesn’t mean it can’t be done.

In 2003, New Iberia brothers Hugh, 38, Mike and Chris Andre, both 29, set out to begin their sugar cane farming business.

Their family had no background in agriculture, Mike Andre said.

“Our dad worked in the oilfield and our mom is a schoolteacher,” Mike Andre said. “The only farming background that we have is Hugh started farming with his best friend’s daddy when he was real young. When he was 10 years old, he used to go around the farm on a tractor.”

Their company, HMC Farm LLC, now farms on roughly 5,000 acres in Vermilion,
Like Gonsoulin, Mike Andre said new farmers face more challenges than they did even a decade ago. For cane farmers, the introduction of Mexican sugar into the American market has driven prices down for U.S. sugar, Andre said. Another major obstacle is unpredictable weather, he said. “Our biggest thing that we are relying on is Mother Nature. If we don’t get the optimum weather then we don’t grow a crop. The last three years have been excellent,” he said. “But prices have been going down. You can grow the best crop in the world. But if you don’t get paid for it doesn’t matter.” Rising fuel and equipment costs also affect production, he said.

The USDA estimates that nationwide, the number of family farms has grown 4 percent after decades of decline. But most of these farms are small operations. According to USDA’s Ag Census, there has been a small increase in large family farms and non-family farms, but fewer mid-level farms. Organizations such as Agriculture of the Middle, which is led by a committee of four state university representatives and the Rural Advancement Foundation, are trying to revive the middle sector of agriculture and supply chains.

Last fall there were 339 students enrolled in Louisiana State University’s College of Agriculture. The enrollment rate is significantly less than other colleges at the university. LSU’s College of Engineering, for example, had 645 students enrolled in the fall 2013 semester.

Ralph O’Brien, 19, a LSU freshman and daughter of an Iowa, La., rice farmer, said she thinks young farmers will continue to emerge. As the state president for Future Farmers of America, she said she has been able to travel around the country and meet with teens who are considering a career in agriculture.

“It’s actually surprising because it’s definitely not an easy job,” she said. She said she recently spoke with a new FFA member who said he plans to take on the family business.

“My dad grows sugar cane and he said that something that really spoke to him is the FFA creed. One line of it says ‘For I know the joys and discomforts of agriculture life.’ He said that it really stood out to him,” O’Brien said. “He’s seen his family go through the good times and the bad times. ‘Even though he’s seen all that, it is something that he wants to do because he couldn’t imagine his life growing up without it.’

State FFA reporter Emily Hartzen, 19, is studying agriculture education at Louisiana Tech University. She said her father was a teacher and her grandfather grew watermelon in Angie, a village in Washington Parish. There are only a handful of students at Tech who share her major, she said, but there is a statewide need for agriculture educators.

“Agriculture is the foundation of our nation. One thing that a lot of people don’t understand is where their food comes from and where their clothes comes from,” she said. “It all starts with the farmer. Where would be without American farmers?”

Now with a 10-year-old business that spans three parishes, Mike Andre and his twin brother Chris have a lot to celebrate. But it has not been an easy journey, he said.

“It was a tough start, especially the first five years,” he said. “But we are still in the game.

“Make sure it’s what you want to do because farming is not a simple life,” he advised. “It has its perks. But it’s not simple. You are worried about weather. You are worried about prices. You are worried about your labor. There’s always worry going on, which is true for any job.”

“But it’s a little bit different when you’ve got to rely on Mother Nature.”