American farmers are getting older and intrepid younger people are stepping in to fill a crucial role.

So they can be tagged for identification. It's not an easy job, but Duncan didn't sign up for an easy job when he decided to become the fourth generation of his family to farm.

He knew what he was getting into — he would work 365 days a year, and sure wasn't going to get rich doing it. In fact, depending on unpredictable factors like market prices and weather, it could be a financial struggle.

He could have done something else and skipped so much work and worry, but would he really feel like he was making a difference?

"It's something I've always done," he said. "I wouldn't trade it for anything. Besides, somebody has to do it."

Indeed, projected population growth raises worrying questions about how we're going to feed all those people. By mid-century, there could be an additional two billion people on the planet. Based on some consumption estimates, we'll have to double the amount of crops currently produced to meet demand.

While it's encouraging to see young people like Duncan stepping into that role, there are not enough like him.

The average age of the American farmer keeps rising, and a substantial number of them will likely be retired or passed away in the coming years. At the same time, the number of new farmers is dropping dramatically.

"The biggest challenge we have in Central Louisiana and across the world is finding new and beginning farmers," said John Dean, director of regional innovation for Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance.

"While we are developing new grow-
New farmers needed

According to the last U.S. Department of Agriculture census in 2012, the average age of the American farmer (defined as the principal operator of a farm) was 58.3 years. That's up from 57.1 in 2007. The number has risen in every five-year census since 1982, when it was barely over 50.

Even more worrying, a third of farmers were 65 or older, and 62 percent were 55 or older. Less than 16 percent of farmers were under 45 years old.

The number of new farmers is also dropping. According to the census, the number of farmers at their current operation for 10 years or less dropped by 20 percent from 2007 to 2012. A third of farmers are around 50 years old, and another third are around 55. The number of farmers under 50 is down to 23 percent.

"Most of us take for granted where our food comes from," said Dean, who is tasked with helping develop and support growers in the region as head of the Local Foods Initiative. "We go to the grocery store and it's just there. It takes a lot of farmers to get it there.

Most people, when they do their work they get a pat on the back and a 'good job!' We probably don't say thank you to farmers enough. It's important to appreciate them." The Yerbys are typical of many young farmers in that they have deep roots in the business.

After graduating from LSU, Ryan worked for a John Deere dealership for a few years, until his father asked him to come in as a partner on about 350 acres. They've added acreage piece by piece since then, where they raise cattle, crops and harvest pecans.

"I don't know anyone who's doing it without a family connection," said Danielle Yerby, who won the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation's Outstanding Young Farmer Award last year for her work helping her husband Ryan run Taureau Farms near Colfax. "For a young person to just decide they want to be a farmer . . . it would be, really, really hard."

Finding land, securing credit and acquiring the necessary expertise can be intimidating stumbling blocks.

To succeed, the Yerbys say, taking being as efficient as possible. Reducing waste, leveraging the latest technology, learning from experience growers. Like a lot of farming families, they have to find income wherever they can (Danielle works full time for the Central Louisiana Chamber of Commerce, while their farm operation has diversified to include small construction jobs).

The Yerbys have a 2-year-old daughter, Reagan. While they cherish her growing up on a farm and believe it's teaching her strong values, they're a little wary of her following in their footsteps.

"She's learning about the cycle of life really early," Danielle said. "She's learning about hard work. It makes you happy to hear her say, 'I want to raise cows. I want to farm like you and daddy.' But you worry, too, because you know how hard it is. But if she doesn't do it, who will? We keep populating this planet. Someone has to feed those people."

"You gamble on Mother Nature, you gamble on the marketplace," Ryan Yerby said. "Every day is the Powerball for us. If you don't hit every number plus the Powerball, you're in a jam."

Pride in what you do
So why do it?

There are many reasons, but perhaps chief among them is a sense of purpose. "Farmers take a lot of pride in what we do," Ryan Yerby said. "You can say, 'I did this, we built this. We took this pile of dirt and turned it into something.' There aren't many more rewarding things than that.

"You know the saying, 'if you love your job, you never have to work,'" Duncan said. "If you didn't love it, you really wouldn't do this. Yeah, you could quit and do something more lucrative, but would you love it?"

Will and Bethany Butterfield simply wanted better food for their children.

The couple, who won the Excellence in Agriculture award from the Louisiana Farm Bureau, started Butterfield Farms more than five years ago. Bethany said. "If they can get fresher, healthier food that is ultimately good for both the farmers and the consumers alike."

Chip and Kristin Evans have a similar story. They started CK Farms near Pineville about six years ago, "because I wanted eggs," Kristin said. After adding a few cows, they hit on what has become the mainstay of CK Farms, pasture-raised pork. It's been a hit at the Inglewood Farm and Alexandria Midweek markets. On Saturday, they took their product to a market in Lafayette, the first time they've sold it outside Alexandria.

Like the Butterfields, they have four children, and like Will Butterfield, Chip Evans has a job outside the farm, commuting about an hour to work as a millwright in Oakdale.

But they have no regrets about taking on the demands of being small farmers.

"We believe in local food," Kristin said. "We believe in being able to know your product, know what you're eating and being able to make good choices. When you give a customer a good product and they come back, that's the most rewarding feeling in the world."

"It's not an easy profession," Dean said. "If it was, everybody would be a farmer. There's definitely not one approach to success. We need the larger growers and we need the people who start off as hobby farmers and are able to grow it into a profitable business."