Coping with the special challenges that come with aging on the farm

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The average age of principal farm operators in the United States is 58, according to the USDA’s most recent Census of Agriculture, published in 2012. In Georgia, the average age of the principal farm operator is 59.9.

People may joke about 60 being the new 40, but the rising age of American farmers has some asking whether this poses problems for the future of agriculture.

There is no single reason why the average age of American farmers is rising, according to Rebecca Brightwell, co-director of the Farm Again/AgrAbility Project at the University of Georgia.

"The reasons are varied and, at times, complex," she said.

Among the contributing factors she cited are smaller families, the lure of economic opportunity in cities, farmers working past the retirement age of 65, and difficulty acquiring land and equipment to get started.

"The land alone is a substantial investment," said Kent Wolfe, director of the UGA Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development. "Combined with the uncertainty that comes with farming, young people may not want to take it up or have the resources to get established. A young person starting out may have to find a niche because he or she cannot compete head-to-head with larger producers."

He noted that many families do not have a transitional plan that will allow the farm to continue when a parent dies.

"The children may get hit with a high tax bill. One may want to continue farming, but the siblings may want to sell the land in order to buy a house or to get the fast return from a developer," he said.

Aging farmers may need practical advice and assistance with transition plans, according to Brightwell.

"Providing local experts in financial planning and legal services at a low cost to farmers could result in saving some farms from closing permanently," she said.

Charles “Buddy” Leger, 85, is a watermelon and pecan farmer in Cordele who turned the day-to-day business of farming over to his son 10 years ago.

"If you have a son or a daughter interested in taking over the business, you need to bite the bullet and turn it over to them. It is not an easy decision," said Leger.

The difficulty of Leger’s decision to hand over the reins was not due to lack of confidence in his son, but was a realization that, although he started and built the business, he needed to let go.

"When you get older—late 70s or early 80s—you can’t do everything you used to be able to do. You have to fall back on someone younger," he said.

Leger timed the transition with an eye toward being available to counsel his son as long as possible.

"I wanted to give him the opportunity while I’m still alive and have my faculties and can provide advice if he needs and asks for it," he said. "It would be a terrible thing to never give him the opportunity to make his own decisions."

Although he’s not the key decision maker anymore, Leger is not retired.

"I don’t ever intend to retire. I have something to do. In the busy time I am here every day from about 5:30 (a.m.) to 1 or 2 in the afternoon," he said.

Leger isn’t unusual among farmers in that regard.

"Most farmers will keep farming until they literally cannot physically do the job anymore," Brightwell said.

As they age, farmers face special challenges.

"The primary challenges for older farmers are hearing loss, arthritis and stress, which leads to all kinds of problems, including injury," said Deborah Reed, director of the Occupational Health Nurse Ph.D. Training Program at the University of Kentucky.

Reed said the two best ways to stay healthy, especially with a physically demanding job like farming, is to deal with stress by keeping lines of communication open at home and to take a break every once in a while.

"Sometimes you need to get away from looking at everything that needs to be done," she said.

Maintaining overall health is important for farmers of any age, but for older farmers, holding damage to hearing and joints is especially important.

"Prevention is the key," Reed said. "Farmers need to take efforts to conserve what they have and prevent further damage."

For those trying to work around injuries and disabilities, the Farm Again/AgrAbility project has helped hundreds of Georgia farm families with chronic health conditions and/or disabilities stay productive.

"There is a cattle farmer well into his 90s who was using his cane to open gates," Brightwell said. "We modified his gates and built ramps to help him drive his utility vehicle to check on his cattle."

The project also assisted an elderly organic farmer by creating a mobile chicken coop she could easily move that was easier for her to maintain and healthier for the chickens. A farmer with Parkinson’s benefited from special "walk-through" gates and step extensions to allow him to climb onto his tractor.

"We have a shop at the Tifton UGA campus where we can fabricate some of the things farmers need," said Brightwell.

The project is funded through foundations and federal grants, and staff services are provided at no cost to the farmer.