

FAMILY VALUES

National Agriculture Week celebrates the legacy of the farm family and their culture and values.

Family values and farming have been integral parts of America's culture since horse and buggy days, and these values continue to be the glue that makes it possible for farmers and ranchers to meet today's consumer and environmental needs. National Agriculture Week, March 17-23 and National Agriculture Day, March 20, will celebrate the continuing legacy of the American farm family.

"As farmers and ranchers, our most important asset is the family," says Ron Vavrina, chairman of the Agriculture Council of America, Ag Day coordinator. "We're continually passing on to our children what we learned from past generations — family values in everything we do, especially in producing food for our kids and everyone else's."

Responding to their own and other families' needs, today's farm families provide Americans and millions of others worldwide with the bounty of high quality, ever improving food, like tomatoes that stay fresh longer. The farm family is also helping consumers lower fat and cholesterol in their diets by producing leaner beef and breeding hogs to be 50 percent leaner than those produced 20 years ago.

Sharing concerns with urban neighbors about the environment, the farm family recycles, too— they recycle feed bags, chemical containers and food by-products. Environment friendly farming methods like precision farming— using satellite maps and computers to match seed, fertilizer and crop protector applications to soil conditions— and minimum tillage, which reduces soil erosion, are key practices in farming today.

To feed each new generation the farm family has learned to adapt new technologies just like their consumer counterparts, relying on tools like cellular phones, computers, satellites and Internet. As a result, one American farmer now produces enough to feed 129 people in the United States and abroad, in comparison to as recently as 1930, when that number was 24.

Profile of the farm family

Nearly 2 million people farm or ranch in the United States. Almost 90 percent of US farms are operated by individuals or family corporations. More than 15 percent of the US population is employed in farm or farm-related jobs, including production agriculture, farm inputs, processing and marketing and wholesale and retail sales.

The average age of farmers and ranchers is slightly more than 53 years old.

Forty-two percent of US total land area is farmland, 945.5 million acres. In 1900, the average farm size was 147 acres; the average farm now has 491 acres. The top five agricultural commodities include: cattle and calves, dairy products, corn, soybeans and hogs.

Farmers and ranchers are independent businessmen and businesswomen who provide for their families by growing and producing food and fiber. They use modern production techniques to increase the quality and quantity of the

food they produce. In the 1960s one farmer supplied 25.8 persons in the United States and abroad. In 1994, one farmer supplied food for 129 people in the United States and abroad.

Farm families use the same technologies as urban families. Many use cellular phones, satellites for weather and information and computers for record keeping and searching for information on the Internet. These technologies help provide up-to-date information and resources, including education opportunities for their children.



Changing to meet consumer demands

Farmers and ranchers are producing meat lower in fat and cholesterol. Today's hog is bred to be 50 percent leaner than that produced 20 years ago. This has resulted in retail cuts that are 15 percent leaner, giving consumers better value for their dollar. Also, much leaner beef cuts are being produced than 20 years ago, resulting in 27 percent less fat reaching the retail case than in 1985.

Research and advancements in biotechnology are now in the marketplace with tastier fruits and vegetables that stay fresh longer and are not damaged by insects.

Consumers derive health benefits from changes in farm production including less fat in meat and longer lasting fresh fruits and vegetables. As well, tofu, a soybean product, has been shown to reduce the risk of some cancer and heart disease.

American agriculture is reaching out to the third world, looking for ways to improve food production in regions where growing conditions are poor and food service is scarce.

Environment comes first

Farmers and ranchers are the first environmentalists, maintaining and improving soil and natural resources to pass on to future generations. Farmers maintain more than 1.3 million acres of grass waterways, allowing water to flow naturally from crops without eroding soil.

Contour farming—planting crops around hillsides instead of up and down—keeps soil from washing away. About 26 million acres in the United States are managed this way. Cattle ranchers and others control water run-off with sod water-ways and diversions, erosion control structures and catch basins.

Just as urban families recycle glass, newspaper and aluminum, farm families have practiced recycling for a long time by applying manure to fields to replace nutrients in the soil. Newer recycling practices have evolved, including recycling chemical containers, feed bags and food by-products. As well, food service food scraps are used to make animal feed.

Waste paper sent by municipal governments to landfills may soon find its way to the farm. US Department of Agriculture researchers are testing the benefits of spreading pelleted waste paper on farm ground to act as an artificial mulch, reducing wind and water erosion, enhancing water retention and building organic matter.