

On the Minds of Young Ag Producers

Four young agricultural producers from South Dakota share eight topics that are top of mind for their future in the industry.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

What's on the minds of next generation agriculturists? Four young South Dakotans had the opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns with South Dakota's first female Governor Kristi Noem, herself a farmer, during a panel discussion at the 2019 South Dakota Governor's Agricultural Summit hosted mid-July in Sioux Falls.

Millennial Angus rancher Calli Williams represented TW Angus on the panel. The purebred operation is newly established by Williams and her husband Tate near Letcher, S.D. The duo sells private treaty bulls

and is also offering farm-raised beef bundles to customers as an alternate revenue stream.

Also participating in the discussion were John Eilertson, a senior animal science major at South Dakota State University (SDSU) from Wentworth, S.D; Logan Wolter, who raises cattle with his family near Wessington Springs and is completing his second year at Mitchell Technical Institute; and Taylor McMartin, who grew up in Hartford, but has been involved in 4-H, FFA and will be a freshman ag communications major at SDSU.

All four young people expressed passion for the ag industry and plans to pursue ag-related careers. While optimistic, they also emphasized the following topics:

1. **Access to land** to get established in agriculture is the biggest concern for these young people. Wolter, whose dad passed away from cancer over a decade ago, has worked with his three younger siblings to keep their cattle operation going. He acknowledged they rent most of the grassland they run their cattle on, and said, "We've been



Pictured (from left) are Calli Williams, Letcher, S.D.; John Eilertson, Wentworth, S.D.; Taylor McMartin, Hartford, S.D.; Logan Wolter, Wessington Springs, S.D.; and South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem.

lucky for 20 years to do so ... It is hard to buy land at a price that pencils out.” Williams shared that she and her husband also struggled with finding land to start their cattle operation, but were fortunate to connect with an elderly man who was a friend of her husband and ready to move to town. Thus, the young couple, who call themselves “millennial ranchers” because they purchased their own land and cattle to get started, are able to live on the farmstead north of Mitchell, S.D., with their land and cattle surrounding them. If it weren’t for the connection with a seller, Williams said it is unlikely they would have been able to live where their cattle are located now.

2. **Mentoring opportunities** that connect young ag producers with retiring producers are needed, according to Eilertson. “It is hard to make connections with retiring farmers if you don’t know them,” Eilertson noted. He encouraged the ag community to “be supportive of young farmers and help make networking connections for them with other people.” Eilertson indicated that a formal mentoring program within counties connecting new farmers with experienced farmers could be an asset and a way for “new farmers to carry on others’ legacy.”
3. **Applying for youth loans** is important, added Eilertson. He shared that in 2012 he applied for and received a youth loan from the Farm Service Agency (FSA). As a result, he was able

to build his production records and show tax returns, which provided the financial history he needed in order to apply for and receive a beginning farmer loan from the FSA.

4. **Get involved in ag through 4-H and FFA.** McMartin, the youngest of the panelists, was not exposed to agriculture until four years ago as a high school freshman. Taking an ag education class and becoming an FFA member introduced her to the industry and prompted her to join 4-H and raise and show sheep. Because of those experiences she now plans to pursue an agricultural degree. She and the other panelists, who were all in FFA, encouraged other youth to become involved in these programs and for communities to support 4-H and FFA.
5. **Help is appreciated**, according to this foursome. When asked what simple things others might do to assist with their agricultural journeys, Williams shared that lending a helping hand by loaning equipment or trading labor is greatly appreciated. She noted that a neighbor loaned them a tractor before one of the major storms this spring and it made a huge difference as they prepared their cow herd for the storm. Wolter, McMartin and Eilertson shared similar sentiments when friends and neighbors have offered support during difficult times and it lifted them up.
6. **Health insurance is a concern.** Williams shared that she and her husband both have off-farm jobs — she sells livestock

insurance at cattle sales — so they have access to company health insurance.

7. **Negative press about ag is a surprise.** These young people say they are concerned about how much negativity and false claims about agriculture are online. Wolter said, “All of us need to try to do a better job telling others about agriculture and the blood, sweat and tears we put into it.” Williams is also concerned about the number of people who share negative ag news headlines. She suggested, “I think we should instead say, ‘Yes, that happened, but look what I did,’ and put a positive example out there.”
8. **Think about the next generation**, was the request from Wolter. He expressed, “If people want their communities and schools to keep growing and [high school] graduates to come back, there has to be opportunities for them as jobs or land.” He shared that many farmers 20 and 30 years ago got their start because a farmer came to them and offered the land to them as they were retiring. “We need that neighborly thing back ... offer it to us [the next generation] before putting land up for auction ... It seems like ‘bigger is better’ prevails today, but it drives young people out.” 