

Future farms in U.S. may not include much family

By Jessica Stoller-Conrad, NPR

It may sound like a line from “The Godfather”, but some agricultural specialists advise that farming isn’t personal; it’s business. And family farms need to think and act more like a business to survive in a competitive world, says Bernie Erven, professor emeritus in the department of agricultural economics at Ohio State University.

Last week, Erven spoke to farmers at the Growing Michigan Agriculture Conference about how to improve their practices to recruit, hire and keep the best employees by using modern methods, like social media.

But the message may be a tough sell. Family farms are an iconic American institution, and they make up nearly 96 percent of farms in America, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And it’s hard for some folks to hear that the best hire might not be your sister’s kid who needs a summer job baling hay.

“If you hire a family member who isn’t qualified, who doesn’t fit the position, and maybe doesn’t even want the position, then it’s ... unlikely the person would succeed,” Erven says. “Thus [it’s] not helping the business and not helping the family.”

If family farms don’t approach hiring in a professional way, there are some uncertainties for both the farm and its employees, he says. “[Will] they treat adding employees as a family matter or is it a business decision?” he says.

According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, U.S. farms spend a total of \$21.9 billion per year employing 2.6 million

hired workers. Streamlining and standardizing hiring processes on family farms could have a significant economic impact.

New outside hiring practices could even help farm families alleviate the expectations of both parents and children. "This argument that you owe it to your children to have a place for them in the farm business, I have trouble with that. Because the other side of that coin is that then your children owe it to you to stay home, even if they don't want to," Erven says.

Additionally, a diverse labor force can help boost the farm's main goal: efficient food production. For example, dairy workers who have experience working with different cattle breeds may bring fresh perspectives and new techniques – additions that can improve farming practices, Erven said.

But pushing the family out of family farms can have disadvantages, too, Jennifer Fahy, communications director at Farm Aid, says in an email. "The family farm is a place where kids grow up and learn responsibility and skills ... they're also learning values and traditions," she says.

Fahy says that the American farming workforce is aging and in desperate need of young farmers to carry on the tradition. "A major factor in young people being interested in becoming farmers is the exposure they receive on their family's farm," she says. "That process of farmers passing down their life's work and traditions to the next generations is so important to the fabric of our food production system and culture."

Farm managers might be able to find the most qualified employees outside of the family, but Fahy says that family tradition is also an important consideration. "There's something beyond experience and skills at work when a family farmer can involve the next generation," she says.