

## Next generation of farmers grows on the Web

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)  
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Registration was at capacity for the first-ever Farmers for the Future Conference in St. Louis, a manifestation of the growing social-networking movement driven by young and prospective farmers breaking ground in the field.

The two-day conference was conceived in conjunction with the Farmers for the Future Web site, launched in October by the publishers of Successful Farming magazine, who said membership has skyrocketed beyond expectations.

“We decided if we had 100 members by the end of year, we’d be O.K.,” explained Jeff Caldwell, news and features editor for Successful Farming and Agriculture Online. “We already have over 1,000.”

Caldwell, who is responsible for managing the Farmers for the Future site, said he initially seeded the online discussions, but now, “It’s gotten to the point where we don’t have to do a lot with it. We just sit back and the community takes care of itself.”

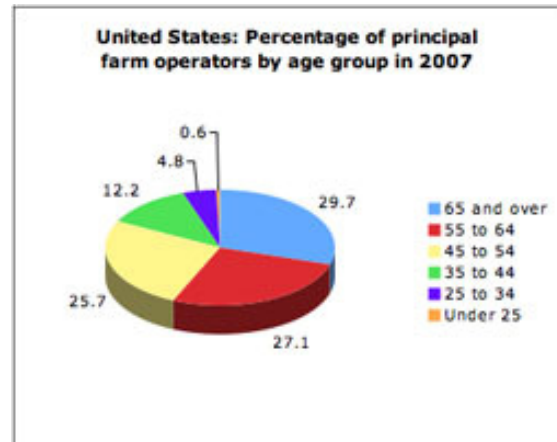
The Farmers for the Future series had been a regular feature in the magazine since the mid-1990s, but Caldwell said the editors noticed growing interest in topics relevant to newcomers to the field, from planting advice to equipment recommendations.

Although the site is oriented toward the younger generation of farmers, whom Caldwell defined as “anyone under 50,” it has enabled seasoned farmers to share information with those who will be taking over the reins in the industry.

With older farmers predominating in the United States, farm succession is a key issue in agriculture. According to the Census of Agriculture released Feb. 4 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, only 17.6 percent of principal farm operators were under 45 years of age in 2007, while farmers 65 and older were the principle operators of 29.7 percent of the nation’s farms.

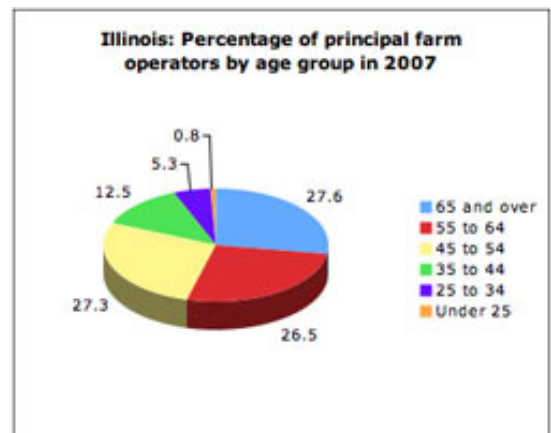
Similarly, in Illinois, just 18.6 percent of farms were in the hands of operators under 45 years of age in 2007, while 27.6 percent of the state’s principal farm operators were over 65.

When the Farmers for the Future site launched on Oct. 18, each new member received an invitation to register for the February conference. Janna Rieker, advertising and research manager for Successful Farming, said the idea was to generate interaction within the community through the social-networking platform, and then provide a venue for hands-on instruction and face-to-face collaboration through events at the conference.



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According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the majority of farms in the country have principal operators over 55 years of age. The figures for Illinois mirror the national numbers.



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Calling from St. Louis an hour before the opening session, Rieker said the conference had a full enrollment of about 150 participants. She said the goal is for the Farmers for the Future to become an annual planning and networking gathering before the spring season.

“Farmers are pretty busy from March through November,” Rieker pointed out, saying February is the ideal time to prepare and share ideas, especially for newcomers.

Conference topics include farm-business diversification, farm-family dynamics, and land access and acquisition, mirroring discussion topics that are common on the Farmers for the Future site.

“It’s a community of people who are excited about their business,” said Caldwell. He acknowledged that the economic crisis is often fodder for conversation on the site, but that members seem optimistic, adding, “It’s kind of a breath of fresh air.”

Although the core of the site’s members are from Midwestern states, Farmers for the Future has members from all over the country, and even a few from Africa, with backgrounds ranging from wheat and soy production to small organic operations. “We even have a couple of alpaca farmers who are pretty active,” Caldwell said.

Farmers for the Future has become an informational crossroads for the diverse pool of members. While young, Web-savvy users have contributed multimedia content, Caldwell said a few members have started blogging about their day-to-day work. “Something like that would not necessarily have editorial value in the magazine, but it has value in the community.”

And community, he said, “is the thread that has been running through the industry for generations.”