



— cover story

# Youth *movement*

*In an era when the farming population continues to get older, we asked four young producers what fuels their drive to go against the grain.*

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**THEY MAY BE YOUNG**, but the producers profiled on the following pages weren't born yesterday. They're smart, savvy and have a range of experience that belies their age.

They're also bucking a trend that shows the farming population getting older. The latest numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau show the average age of a farmer in the States at 57.1 years. That number was from 2007 and up from the 1978 age of 50.3. Furthermore, data show there's been a drop of 21% in farmers younger than 45 since 2002. In Canada, the average producer age is 52 years, up from 47.5 in 1991.

Statistics concerning the age of farmers tell us what is happening, but not why the farm population is aging. In short, it's complicated, but is in part due to the fact that farmers are living longer, as is the rest of the population. Yet, as noted above, the number of young farmers getting into the business is falling, perhaps due in large part to the cost of entry—the average asset base of farms with annual sales of \$50,000 or more (the average profit threshold for a farm) was over \$1.9 million in 2007.

The cost of land, equipment and inputs are more than many young people can afford.

So, why did these families choose farming, and what obstacles have they encountered getting into and staying in the business? There's no one answer, in part because each of their situations is different; farmers work a range of acreage across North America and raise a variety of crops and livestock. But there were a few takeaways from our conversations: Each grew up on a farm, and had a leg up once they decided to farm, two have jobs beyond the farm to help ends meet, and all agree that they need to do more with less.

Finally, each of our young farmers said the main reason they got in the business was because they like the work, especially the independence and the importance of producing food. In fact, all four described their love of farming—the good times and the bad—with such enthusiasm that we finished these interviews feeling good about the future. While there may be fewer farmers, at least farming will be in skilled, caring hands.

**FAST FACTS: The Aging Farm Population** /// Decrease in farmers younger than 45 since 2002: 21% /// Average age of a U.S. farmer in 2007: 57.1