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SPOTLIGHT

Betting the farm? New Mexico's aging producers prepare for the next generation

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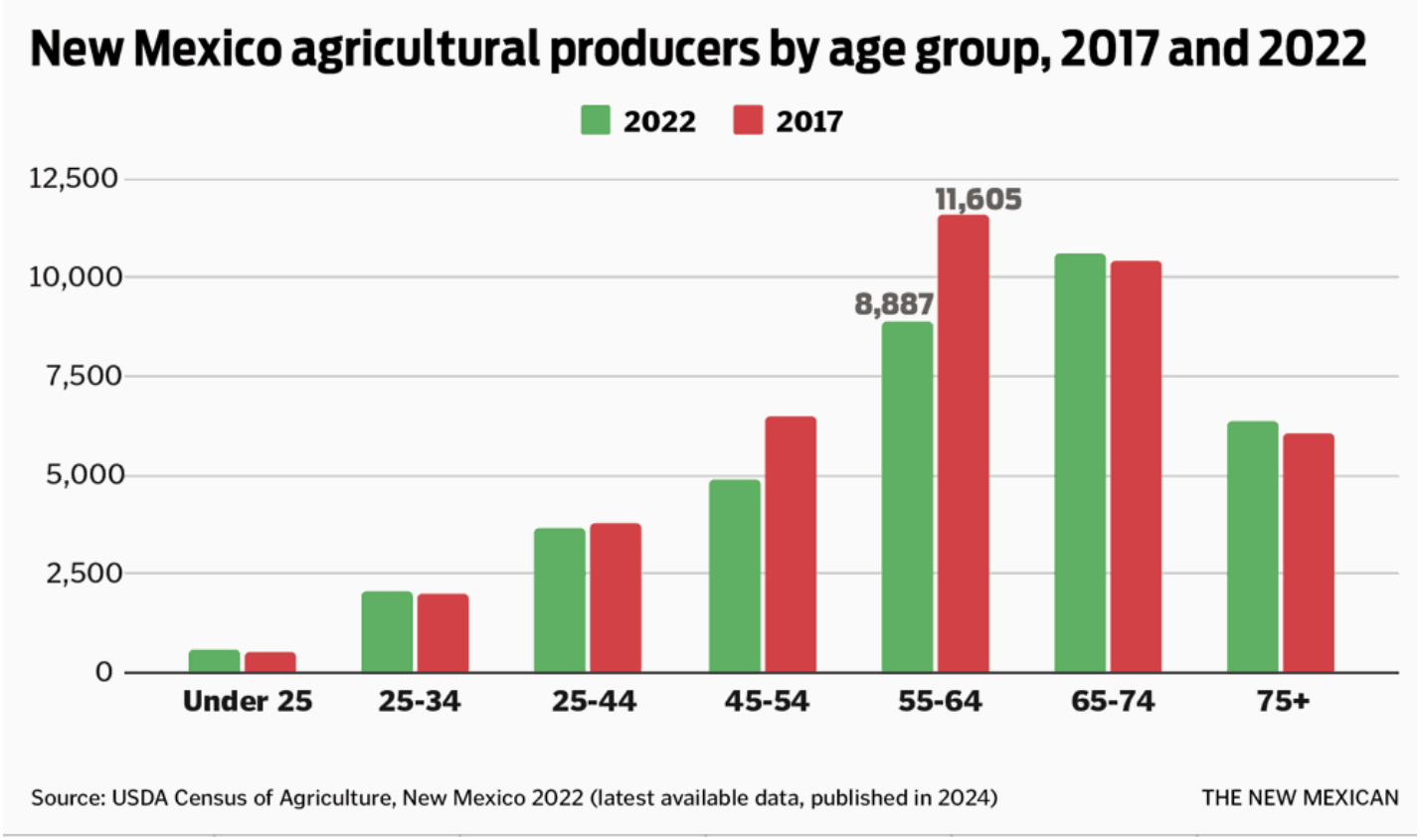
TALPA — Carlos Arguello says he's "trying to be the ancestor that the future needs."

At 69, Arguello, who grows corn, chile and other vegetables at El Tros Farm — a plot of about 10 acres near Talpa, a historic community southeast of Taos, where his family has lived and worked since the mid-1960s — is making preparations now to ensure he can pass the farm on to his grandchildren without burdening them with unwanted responsibilities.

He's nearly completed a succession plan that accomplishes the goal. He plans to use a limited liability company that combines the property's multiple income streams, ranging from garden and livestock revenue to on-farm rental properties, including an agritourism vacation rental.

The question on Arguello's mind: "How do I give them the opportunity to hold on to it over generations in a manner that doesn't become a financial burden on them and it doesn't fall into disrepair?"



Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's latest Census of Agriculture shows the average age of New Mexico farmers is nearly 61, two years older than the national average. It's one of a few workforce-related challenges facing the state's agricultural sector — including its crop of distinctive Hatch green chile — as farmers bemoan a shrinking local labor force and increasingly rely on foreign workers.

While some small farms, like Arguello's, have developed innovative ways to encourage the next generation to maintain farming and ranching traditions, others struggle to ensure the future of their enterprises.

Cultivating New Mexico's agricultural industry isn't just about continuing family traditions, said Manny Encinias, executive director of the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute and a fifth-generation cattle rancher. It's about keeping people fed, particularly as data from the University of New Mexico's Geospatial and Population Studies shows many Northern New Mexico communities — including those in Santa Fe, Sandoval, Los Alamos and Taos counties — are expected to grow by 2040.

“The world population continues to grow. That, to me, is the biggest reason why we need more people in agriculture,” Encinias said.

Ari Thomas, 5, granddaughter of farmer Carlos Arguello, uses a pitchfork to move hay to feed the horses at her grandfather's farm near Talpa last week. Thomas, visiting her grandfather from Phoenix, visits a couple times a year and is learning the skills to maintain a farm.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Arguello, then, is looking to the future.

"We all talk about ancestors, and we think about the past, the past, the past," he said. "We learn from those lessons. We carry that tradition; we carry the *querencia*. But now, how do we pay it forward?"

Tough getting started

Marisol Olivas bucks the trend.

Born and raised in Belen, the 23-year-old said she fell in love with agriculture by participating in 4-H and raising livestock with her family. After graduating from New Mexico State University with a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics and business in 2024, she's pursuing a master's degree focused on agribusiness at the university, while serving as a student regent.

Carlos Arguello looks down at maturing green chile peppers while doing a walk last week through his farm near Talpa where he grows corn, chile and other vegetables.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

There are still some young farmers out there "doing their part to feed the world," Olivas said.

However, she added, "When I look at it, when I see it, there's going to be risk in everything that you do. ... Am I going to take that risk to remain in agriculture, and is it going to be financially viable for me?"

Agriculture can be a particularly risky — and tough to access — business, said Jay Lillywhite, associate dean of NMSU's College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences and director of the Agricultural Experiment Station.

At least in part, farmers are getting older because everybody's getting older, Lillywhite said. New Mexico's population over 65 is growing rapidly as the baby boomer generation ages.

But there are also parts of agriculture that make it an especially tough industry for young people to break into.

It's a "capital-intensive business," Lillywhite said. Farmland can cost $40,000 to $50,000 per acre. A new tractor will run a few hundred thousand dollars, with specialty equipment — used for tasks like harvesting pecans — sold for high prices, too.

Robert Martinez Sr. breaks up pieces of hay to feed his bulls at his barn near Taos on June 19.
Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

For a young person trying to get started in farming or ranching, Lillywhite said, those startup costs are "a big hurdle to try to get over."

Meanwhile, cash flow is often limited, he added. Farmers have to wait months for seeds and livestock to mature while paying for fertilizer, feed and, in some cases, pesticides.

On top of those financial challenges, there are the physical demands of farming and ranching: "It's outdoors. You're in the weather. You're dealing with all that, as well," Lillywhite said.

The results of those economic factors show up in the Department of Agriculture's latest census, which found just 2,666 of the more than 37,000 agricultural producers across New Mexico — a little over 7% — are 35 or younger.

Even among new and beginning producers, the census shows, the average age is nearly 50.

"There's the old adage that you either marry into it or you inherit it," Lillywhite said of farming and ranching. "There's probably some truth to that."

Carlos Arguello walks last week through his fields at El Tros Farm — a plot of about 10 acres near Talpa.
Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Thinning profit margins

As profits shrink, farmers and ranchers sometimes have to take on second jobs to make ends meet.

It's something Robert Martinez Jr. sees often: Ranchers and farmers in Taos, where his family has been ranching for generations, need day jobs to subsidize their agriculture work and afford Taos' high cost of living.

It's one of the reasons he thinks the younger generations are turning away from their parents' land.

When Martinez attends agricultural meetings in Taos, he's often the youngest in the room.

“And I’m 42 years old,” he said.

Robert Martinez Sr. looks out at his cattle grazing in the fields near his barn near Taos on June 19. Robert Martinez Sr.’s son Robert Martinez Jr. is picking up the reins and will start assuming more responsibilities at the families cattle ranch. "Our main focus now is, honestly, to break even," Martinez Jr. said. "Luckily enough, we have other livelihoods which can sustain families and those types of things." He said the family aims to "set up our children for — hopefully — doing the same thing."

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Martinez has ranching in his blood, but he lives about two hours south of the family ranch.

He also has a full-time job at a company that manufactures medical research instruments. The company builds devices that can print the genetic material RNA with the goal of using individuals' own RNA in targeted medical treatments.

Whenever they can, he and his family head north to help with the cattle ranch.

"Our main focus now is, honestly, to break even," Martinez said. "Luckily enough, we have other livelihoods which can sustain families and those types of things." He said the family aims to "set up our children for — hopefully — doing the same thing."

His own father, Robert Martinez Sr., recently retired from a full-time job as an engineer at Los Alamos National Laboratory. But Martinez Jr. thinks his father is busier than ever.

The elder Martinez wants his grandsons to stay at the ranch for the summer.

"I truly believe you build men through hard work," Martinez Sr. said. "And ranching is perfect."

Carlos Arguello moves his horse back into a pen last week after having its hooves trimmed at El Tros Farm near Talpa.
Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

He added, "I think my daughter and my daughter-in-law are a little fearful what I would do to them, which is work hard — and we would play hard, we'd all go fishing, which I don't have time for now."

And it is hard work, often with little financial reward.

The elder Martinez says with limited meatpacking options in the region, an increasing amount of the revenue ends up going to the packer rather than the rancher, and he has to book months in advance. To combat it, he's been trying to sell more meat directly to consumers, which he said can insulate the business from volatile market prices and raise the overall revenue.

But the whims of the market aren't the only challenge. He recalls periods of drought, which can and have pinched profits.

"We were selling cows at 25 cents on the dollar," Martinez Sr. said. "And we had to because of the drought."

But the rains always come, Martinez Sr. noted. He recalled his own father telling him, "*Dios se tarda, pero nunca olvida* — God might tarry, but he never forgets."

"Man, I'm still trying to please him," Martinez Sr. said.

Carlos Arguello takes a step last week over an acequia that he uses to irrigate his fields near Talpa.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Preparing for the transition

A universal truth has popped up in Olivas' research on agricultural succession planning: "When we're dealing with land and family and money, things can get very, very difficult," she said.

While big businesses often develop strategic plans for future transitions, that's not always the case for family farmers, said Chadelle "Chaddy" Robinson, an associate professor in the Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business Department at NMSU.

Succession planning requires farmers and ranchers to ask tough questions, Robinson said: "At what point does a 60-something-year-old want to hand it off to their family or transition it to somebody else that wants to go into agriculture?"

The process can involve setting reasonable goals, gathering financial and other technical information, seeking help from accountants and attorneys, and having frank discussions with family members.

One of Robert Martinez Sr.'s calves eats grass in his fields on June 19.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

There is help available for farmers and ranchers looking to make succession plans. NMSU and its extension offices provide trainings and numerous online resources, including succession planning checklists, and dos and don'ts.

The New Mexico Farm and Ranch Management Program, also housed at NMSU, is working to develop a financial benchmarking program for agricultural producers, in addition to leading Annie's Project in New Mexico, a training program to support women farmers, said Frannie Miller, an assistant professor in the university's Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business Department.

Olivas is working to improve resources in New Mexico for farm succession and transition planning.

She's been interviewing farm succession specialists in every state to learn the most effective ways to help farmers, such as putting on workshops, furnishing goal-setting and planning workbooks, or providing mediation to smooth out interpersonal challenges that can arise during the process.

That research, which will become the foundation for Olivas' master's thesis, will identity best practices to help New Mexico farmers prepare for the future.

Eventually, Robinson said, the hope is to secure legislative funding to hire succession specialists to put Olivas' findings into action across the state.

"The main generation has worked their whole life to build their business, to build their operation, and so getting them ready to transfer over that management to the next successor is a huge deal," Olivas said.

Ari Thomas, 5, climbs over a gate last week to partake in one of her favorite actives — climbing the hay bales — at her grandfather's farm, El Tros Farm, near Talpa.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Preserving 'sacred culture'

Arguello has put a lot of work into preparing El Tros Farm for the next generation. He's taken the workshops, attended the webinars and consulted with the accountants and lawyers — all while making plans to diversify the farm's revenue streams through rentals.

Arguello said he's also talked to his older set of grandchildren, ages 24, 21 and 16, about what he anticipates their roles on the farm will be. Well-versed in finance tracking, the eldest will serve as treasurer. The more mechanically minded middle grandchild will be in charge of farm equipment. The youngest, an animal lover, will manage the livestock.

With luck, the land could remain in the family for another century or more, Arguello said.

"It's my way of trying to preserve the ag culture, the sacred culture that's been here for generations," he said.

When his grandkids and other neighborhood children join in the acequia's *limpia*, Arguello makes a point to remind them of that history. Together, they clean out the ditch, which has been sustaining the farm with water from the Rio Chiquito since the late 1600s.

"How many people do you think were walking down this ditch bank carrying a shovel?" Arguello asks. "You're on top of a lot of footsteps."

About this series

New Mexico's agricultural industry is facing challenges, with an aging population of farmers and ranchers and changes coming to a federal visa program many rely on to provide seasonal workers.

Today: The average age of New Mexico farmers is nearly 61, or two years older than the national average. *The New Mexican* explores how aging farmers are planning for the future of their enterprises.

Monday: Agricultural producers in New Mexico — and around the country — increasingly depend on the H-2A visa program as local farmworkers become harder to find. Critics have called for reforms to program and the Trump administration has promised changes, but the potential effects remain unclear.

New Mexico's top crops by acre farmed

Vegetables

- Peppers other than Bell (including chile): 8,484 acres
- Potatoes: 5,831 acres
- Onions: 5,760 acres
- Pumpkins: 1,588 acres
- Watermelons: 1,012 acres
- Lettuce: 504 acres
- Squash: 442 acres
- Total land in vegetables: 23,778 acres

Fruits and nuts

- Pecans: 59,854 acres
- Peanuts: 1,640 acres
- Grapes: 925 acres
- Pistachios: 561 acres
- Total land in orchards: 63,248 acres

Other crops

- Hay: 296,954 acres
- Corn, all uses: 119,962 acres
- Sorghum, all uses: 73,036 acres
- Cotton: 46,527 acres

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture, New Mexico 2022.

By the numbers

20,976: Total farms in New Mexico in 2022.

- 22,009 male farmers.
- 15,014 female farmers.

9,826: New or beginning farmers in the state.

60.6: Average age of a New Mexico farmer.

54%: Farmers who have a job other than farming.

95%: Farms that are family owned and operated.

39 million: Acres of farmland in New Mexico.

1,865 acres: Average farm size in the state.

- 82% of farmers operate on less than 1,000 acres.

$2.9 billion: Market value of agricultural products sold in 2022.

- $2 billion in livestock.
- $896 million in crops.

$45 billion: Total economic impact of state's agriculture industry.

- $12.9 billion in wages.
- $4.8 billion in business taxes.
- $301.8 million in exports.

253,529: Jobs generated by the state's agriculture industry.

Sources: 2024 USDA Census of Agriculture, based on 2022 data; 2025 Feeding the Economy report

Takeaways

- The average age of New Mexico farmers is nearly 61, or two years older than the national average. While some small farms have developed innovative ways to invite the next generation into their work, others struggle to secure the future of their enterprises.
- Economic factors, especially high startup costs and limited cash flow, can make it difficult for young farmers and ranchers to get started in the business. Farmers 35 and younger make up only about 7% of the state's agricultural producers.
- To make ends meet, farmers and ranchers sometimes have to take on other jobs to support their agricultural work.
- Researchers at New Mexico State University are working to develop best practices to assist farmers in succession planning, with the ultimate goal of securing legislative funding to support succession specialists.

MORE INFORMATION

New Mexico farmers heavily rely on a federal visa program facing an overhaul

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