Experts are concerned that too many farm children want to be non-farm adults.

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Rick Barrett Agribusiness reporter

At school they call him "Tex" because he wears a cowboy hat, drives a pickup and saves his money to build a cattle herd.

And that handle suits 18-year-old Doug Taylor of Mount Horeb just fine, since he's doggedly determined to become a farmer.

Taylor's parents sold their dairy farm in 1996. After that, he worked on a neighbor's farm until it was sold.

Now, Taylor works on another neighbor's farm while he finishes his senior year at Mount Horeb High School.

Preparing to start his own farm, he has been buying cattle and farm machinery since he was 16.

"A little bit at a time. That's the way I am doing this," he said.

The trouble is, there aren't enough young people with goals like Taylor's, said Larry Swain, a UW-River Falls rural economist.

"The number of young people going into the business is diminishing real fast, and it was small to start with," he said.

Wisconsin has a lot to lose if more young people don't enter farming, according to Swain.

Using a multiplier formula that accounts for the number of times money is spent and re-spent in a town, he figures a moderate-size farm with a gross annual income of $200,000 is worth $720,000 to the town.
"If we don't pump new life into farms, some rural communities are going to die," Swain said.

With changes in technology, today's farmers produce more food per acre than farmers produced in the mid-1900s.

That said, there won't be a need for as many farms in the next millennium.

Yet there still aren't enough young people to replace farmers who are quitting every year, said Tom Thieding, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation's communications director.

"We are probably going to have to recruit non-farm children into agriculture, and get them interested in being small business owners (farmers)," Thieding said.

Most children are influenced by their parents when making career choices, Thieding said. Children whose parents had miserable farming experiences will probably go into some other career field.

But some of the negative attitudes about farming are fading, he added. Today, young farmers are finding ways to build successful businesses without having to undergo some of the pain and personal sacrifices that other generations of farmers experienced.

"I think it's an important point because the children of these young farmers are going to see agriculture in a more favorable light," Thieding said. "They will see farming as a business they can thoroughly enjoy."

The farm that Taylor grew up on was in his family for three generations before it was sold in an estate dispute.

But the notion that you have to continue the family farm to stay in agriculture is changing, said Bruce Jones, director of UW-Madison's Center for Dairy Profitability.

One reason is cost: Today, 80 acres of farm land costs about $200,000 and a dairy cow costs about $2,000.

To lower costs and spread out the workload, farmers are forming partnerships. One farmer might own land
and specialize in raising crops, for example, while his partner brings livestock to their enterprise.

If agriculture is in their hearts, Jones said, young farmers will find opportunities.

Near Mount Horeb, 15-year-old David Haag has seen the difficult side of farming. Three years ago, Johne's disease devastated his family's 65-cow dairy herd.

"We have struggled to rebuild," he said.

Haag said he enjoys working with cows and doing field work on his parents' 400-acre farm. He also likes the idea of someday being his own boss, as an independent farmer.

"I am an outdoors person and I would like to have some land of my own," he said.

But as much as he enjoys farming, Haag said it bothers him that many farmers get so little time off.

"I have a lot of respect for my dad," Haag said. "But if I get into farming, I would like to have more free time than he's had."

Haag and his parents, Lee and Sandy Haag, are planning a fish farming operation to supplement their dairy farm income.

"I am really interested in that," David Haag said. "I am not sure if I want to take over my dad's farm, but I would like to stay involved in agriculture."

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