

Keeping the family farm or ranch in the family is a point of pride for lots of folks in Southern Missouri. Understandably so. Many Missouri families carved a living from the land more than a century ago, and their small businesses have weathered the bad years and prospered in better times. Still other families have aspired to own a ranch or a farm, and poured decades of effort into making that dream come true.

These families put the "culture" in agriculture, and it is a culture of hard work, perseverance, respect for the land, pride in feeding the nation and the world, and belief in the permanence of agriculture as a vocation best run by families and not corporations.

All of that long and storied and successful tradition is put at risk by rules from the Department of Labor which threaten to classify the children of farm families as illegal child laborers. For feeding livestock, for driving a tractor, for working at an auction or for doing farm chores, these new rules would levy fines and hand down punishments.

Worse, the regulations would discourage a young generation of future farmers and future ranchers from taking up agriculture and keeping their family businesses alive. These rules would kill the aspiration of young Americans to own their own land, build their own businesses, and take care of the resources that provide so much to rural communities in return.

Here is a story which is not uncommon in Southern Missouri: I know a young farmer who is just 21 years old. He used his earnings from farm work to buy calves. He raised the calves and sold them at auction, and he saved that money, too. He's just bought a house using the proceeds of raising livestock as his down payment. This young man is on his way thanks to the work ethic and the proceeds of his budding business.

Working odd jobs at the ranch down the road, raising a calf for sale at auction, helping out at harvest – new rules threaten all these crucial, exciting, educational and just-plain-fun parts of growing up in Southern Missouri. These restrictions remove an opportunity like that young farmer had to get ahead by getting an early start. It's not so much the money he earned; it's the experience he learned that will serve him best.

We are up against a rule-making government that doesn't understand, or even try to understand, much about rural America. Bureaucrats want to regulate dust on our farms, force us to store milk as though it is crude oil, and run our agriculture and manufacturing economy on solar power. They don't realize, above all, that agriculture is deeply engrained in many of our families, vital to much of our economy, and it forms the basis of our character.

Starting this education in ethics at an early age is essential to passing the family business on to the next generation.

Ask a farmer or rancher in Southern Missouri today when they first sat on a tractor or took an animal to auction – they'll tell you age five, age eight. They'll tell you they knew then that the family business was in their blood. And children who grew up on farms and embarked on totally different careers will tell you the same thing, before noting how the farm or ranch experience makes them better nurses or police officers or shopkeepers.

Ask those same members of our agriculture community in Missouri if they would ever put their own children at risk or allow them to work without giving them the tools they need to be safe. Never – not a chance. We don't need a federal agency to tell us when our children can start on the farm or the ranch. It is up to parents to decide when to teach the life lessons to make these kids, and their own farms and ranches, successful in the future.