Podcast: As more US farmers retire, here's how to recruit a new generation of growers to feed us

Is farming for the aging? While Paul McCartney ponders, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" plant pathologist Steve Savage wonders who will farm now that 62% of U.S. farmers are at retirement age.

Today, particularly in affluent societies like ours, only a small subset of the population is required to do the actual farming needed to feed the rest of us. We recently got to see a profile of that small part of our society because in April of this year, the USDA published the 2017 Census of Agriculture—a detailed survey that is completed every five years. It includes key data that speaks to the question of who it is that will be feeding us.

As of 2017, there were 3.4 million total agricultural "producers" in the U.S. (that means people who are directly involved in making decisions on farms). As part of a theme that is consistent with earlier surveys, the age distribution of those producers is decidedly weighted towards older people. The average age of the producers in 2017 was 57.5 years, and that fits the somewhat concerning, long-term trend that our farmers are getting older.

Over the past 15 years, the proportion of young farmers (say under 35), has stayed virtually constant at just under 10 percent. The proportion of "middle aged" farmers has dropped steadily from 47 percent to 30 percent. It is the "55 and over" segment of farm operators that has increased 17 percent, rising from 45 percent in 2002 to 62 percent in 2017.

On this episode of Biotech Facts and Fallacies, Savage examines the barriers beginning farmers must overcome as well as the vast job opportunities available in agriculture today.

Full show transcript available here.

Steve Savage is a plant pathologist and senior contributor to the GLP. Follow him on Twitter @grapedoc. The Pop Agriculture podcast is available for listening or subscription on iTunes and Google Podcasts.