

Farm women, children fill labour gap^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As hired hands disappear from western Canadian farms, women and children have picked up the shovels and stepped into the tractors.

A national study of farm work habits has shown how much work family members are doing. The 2001-02 study of 600 farm families across Canada was released May 7 by the National Farmers Union and the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment in Muenster, Sask.

"If anything, the hours of work are underreported," said NFU women's president Karen Pedersen. Sometimes the respondents were too tired to fill in their time diaries or agree to be interviewed.

The number of women doing farm field work increased by 12 percent from the last study done in 1982, and 22 percent more are doing farm management tasks. While more women have picked up farm or off-farm work, they have kept farm household tasks such as cooking, cleaning and child care.

The change is partly caused by attitude shifts in society that make it more acceptable for women to take new roles, and partly because machinery is easier for women and children to operate.

But NFU representatives said the main reason is the financial squeeze on farms. Family members are having to help out the men more by generating income from off-farm jobs or doing farm chores.

Martz said that amount of work leads to stress and training and safety concerns.

The children are also being pressed into work, although their roles are more traditional than their parents. Male youths in the study reported doing more field work, while females worked in the house.

The study also found that while half of the young people in the survey want to take over the farm, they wonder if they can afford it.

While farmers in the study were vague on solutions, other than to educate the urban public about the advantages of domestically grown food, Pedersen and Storey said another answer could be government policy that recognizes family farms must be retained.

Pedersen said the NFU's next step will be a study of whether the federal agricultural policy framework affects women differently than men.

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