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Iowa View

Obama should launch a New Farmer Corps

Barack Obama's election has triggered a new sense of optimism and opportunity across the land. His ability to harness this energy to address our challenges will define his success as president.

From the perspective of Iowa's cornfields, where his race began, one of the serious challenges America faces is finding the next generation of farmers — the thousands of new families needed to produce our food, steward the land and rebuild the fabric of rural America.

The history of American agriculture is a tale of declining farm numbers. Our rapidly aging farm population and growing concentration of land with absentee owners place the future of farming in doubt. Research by Michael Duffy at Iowa State University shows that today more than 60 percent of Iowa farmland is rented, and 55 percent is owned by people over 65. As the countryside empties and land moves to non-farmer owners, the security and sustainability of our food system is threatened.

Ironically, this is happening as



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surging interest in local food, the environment and health open new markets for farmers. Janie Simms Hipp, USDA's national program leader for beginning farmer development, agrees we are at a critical juncture in transferring our farming infrastructure.

In his nomination acceptance speech, Obama said, "America, now is not the time for small plans." Here is a big plan the president could embrace: Launch a New Farmer Corps and set a 10-year goal of establishing one-half million new farms in the United States.

The New Farmer Corps would link his advocacy for public

service with an initiative to plant the next generation of America's farm families. The program would assist current owners to transfer land and offer new farmers training, capital and markets to make their farms thrive. It would encourage states and counties to plan for supporting new farmers.

As a son of Iowa's soil and part of a four-generation legacy of farm ownership, I know firsthand how the wealth accumulated by hardworking farm families built our rural society and economy. A renewed Jeffersonian vision can make farming the green career choice for thousands of Americans. Agriculture may have changed, but the promise and potential for farming and land ownership to build our culture and economy have not dimmed.

If anything, consumer demand for better food is creating more opportunities to farm. From Iowa's cornfields to the urban gardens of Detroit, from New England's orchards to the ranches of the Plains, America needs new people with ideas and energy to be the future of

agriculture. Across the nation, consumers are seeking safe, delicious, and healthy food, grown locally, if possible. A New Farmer Corps would be the president's call to create the new farms needed to satisfy our demands.

Public efforts to support beginning farmers exist. But the initiatives suffer from lack of funding, little sense of public urgency and no integrated vision to address the challenges faced by someone who wants to start farming.

The New Farmer Corps would build on existing efforts, such as Iowa's voluntary land-link program, which matches aging farmers with young families seeking a start. It would harness loans offered by USDA and Farm Credit banks, but supplement them with benefits new farmers could earn by caring for the land, conserving energy and producing healthy food. Congress could authorize education, training and health benefits to families investing their sweat, labor and dreams on rural and urban farms.

America has no shortage of people eager to put their hands in the soil to feed us. Thousands

of potential new farmers exist — college students laboring on urban farms, farm kids hoping to continue the family tradition, and immigrants and refugees who brought their agrarian legacy to America. What we lack is a coordinated, creative national effort.

The New Farmer Corps could succeed by supplementing current efforts with new funds and tax incentives, such as Iowa's tax break for owners who make land available to new farmers rather than holding it until death. The New Farmer Corps could offer special training and credit incentives for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, so they can join the ranks of America's farmers and continue serving, but in more pastoral and nurturing ways.

If Obama asks Americans to support a New Farmer Corps, I'm confident it will unleash an outpouring of interest from new farmers in every corner of America's fertile land as well as from citizens — the eaters yearning for healthy food and anxious to support a more sustainable future for America's farms.