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**DADE COUNTY FARM BUREAU**

# **Simpler is better with ideas to save agriculture**

**By Katie A. Edwards**

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My education as an agricultural economics student at Clemson University was based on the three factors of production: land, labor and capital.

In less-complicated times, we, as students, had to graph a supply-and-demand equation to determine how many boxes of corn a farmer would have to harvest at \$5 a bushel in order to break even.

Fast forward to the present, and that same farmer has to determine how government regulations and uncertainty in the markets will impact his bottom line. I still haven't figured out how to graph that equation.

Many, if not all, of government policies and regulations focus on one factor of production: land. For example, Miami-Dade County's strategic plan has a benchmark of "no net loss of agricultural lands." It's a noble intention, but it fails to recognize that land is but one part of the equation.

In May, I received a frantic phone call from a farmer who could not find labor to harvest his perishable tomato crop. With no available labor, the farmer ultimately plowed under 45 acres of tomatoes.

It led me to ask, "What good are 45 acres of tomatoes if you don't have the labor to harvest it?"

If our elected leaders in Washington pass an immigration reform bill without a viable guest-worker component, the threat of a labor shortage will become a reality for all agricultural producers.

Farmworkers are a silent sector of the workforce who are equally affected by the rising cost of living in South Florida. We are losing more and more valued workers to other parts of the country because quality of life is simply unaffordable.

Capital is the final and equally important factor of production.

Farmers depend on the equity in their land to acquire the capital to purchase necessary inputs like seed, fertilizer, fuel and equipment. Just as homeowners face uncertainty in the housing market because of interest rates, rising insurance costs and increasing property taxes, farmers face uncertainty too.

With pending water limitations in place because of dangerously low levels in Lake Okeechobee, growers must prepare now for potential irrigation restrictions. They must also try to offset rising insurance costs, taxes, wages, and so forth. This is especially difficult since farmers are price takers, not price makers. Increased production costs cannot be passed along to consumers.

Finally, farmers must weigh their opportunity costs. In other words, what is the farmer giving up in order to stay in agriculture?

I challenge our policy makers to reexamine their approach to sustaining agriculture. If the industry is to survive, we must take a holistic view that focuses on agribusiness retention, not simply land preservation.

Our elected officials should always remember simple economic principles when developing and reviewing land-use policies. Land is a factor of production, not intended to be the be-all, end-all for saving an economic industry.

Farmland was never intended to be a private subsidy for the public's benefit, as state Sen. Nancy Argenziano says. If we continue to concentrate our efforts on protecting only one factor of production, we are guaranteed to fail the equation every time.

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