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Exodus of rural youth puts communities in jeopardy

By Mark Parker

Soldier, Kansas - The precious national resource that is rural America is in peril and Weldon Sleight is trying to do something about it. It's not the grass-covered hillsides, nor the cornfields, nor those amber waves of grain that the dean of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture is most concerned with — it is the young people born and raised out beyond the city limits sign.

“We can ride it out until it's all gone or we can do something about it,” Sleight told Kansas Rural Center board members and their guests recently at Soldier, Kan. “Somehow, rural folks have to stand up and say we are not going to lose our kids to the city any longer.”

Citing statistic after statistic that track the rural-to-urban exodus in Nebraska as well as Kansas, the veteran educator outlined his strategy for keeping young people on the farm and in the rural communities that nurtured them.

Entrepreneurship is the key to providing opportunities for rural youth, he asserted, and that approach has been incorporated into the curriculum at Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture, located in the small town of Curtis in western Nebraska.

The school's 100-Beef Cow Ownership Advantage Program was Sleight's first volley in the battle to revolutionize agricultural education. With a goal of preparing students to be farm and ranch owners rather than hired hands, the effort begins with a contractual agreement between a student and an established cowherd owner. Essentially, the student utilizes a low-interest loan through USDA's Beginning Farmer-Rancher Program to purchase 100 cows and trades his or her labor to the rancher in return for hosting those cows. In addition to completing educational requirements, the young person is able to build the herd up to 300-or-so head in a 10-year period. At that point, he or she has the collateral to obtain financing for an independent operation.

And instead of leaving the farm, the rural community gains a new business.

“We are at a critical crossroads,” Sleight told Kansas Rural Center board members. “I want ranch and farm ground to be owned by families, not corporations.”

Sleight’s strategy for preserving the vitality of rural America also involves programs aimed at other types of farming as well as any sort of rural-based business. Additionally, he supports that effort with an outreach program offering agricultural education classes at 27 Nebraska high schools.

And along with furthering the understanding of agriculture’s pivotal role, Sleight aims to instill in young people a desire to remain part of rural America and its communities.

“Somehow, we have to teach community pride,” he said. “We have to show them the reasons why they should come back home after college. We have to show them the opportunities.”

Instilling community pride cannot be limited to young people, however. “It kills me when people drive 40 miles to go to WalMart when their local hardware store is about to close,” he noted, urging rural folks to support rural businesses.

The educator believes that his strategy, which has dramatically boosted enrollment at Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture, does not have to be limited to farms and ranches. Rural communities are also losing their town doctors, pharmacists, mechanics and a whole host of positions that, once empty, tend to remain that way.

“When (those people) retire, that’s it,” Sleight said. “Instead of identifying a young person in the community and showing them how they could come back to fill that role, we lose an important part of the community.”

He urged people in all aspects of rural life to consider creative ways in which they can pass on their businesses — and their roles — in and outside small town America.

“Communication is the most important thing,” Sleight emphasized. “There are ways to ensure succession but the key is you’ve got to do it before you die. ... In other words, you have to plan for it, you have to have vision.”

Sleight isn’t against rural community efforts to bring in new businesses from outside that community. “We ought to do all we can to get those (high-tech) jobs in our rural communities,” he said. That approach, however, is not the answer, Sleight believes. Asserting that agriculture is central to both local and state economies, he insisted that it is critical to “go back to our base.”

That base is agriculture and Sleight emphasized the extreme importance of groups such as the Kansas Rural Center in fostering and promoting rural and agricultural development. Urging all rural people to get involved, he reiterated his belief that efforts should be directed toward the young people of rural America.

“Somehow,” he said, “you have to put your arm around them and bring them home.”

Sleight spoke at the Kansas Rural Center summer board meeting August 28 in an afternoon presentation open to the public. He also addressed a group of KRC board members and northeast Kansas farmers and ranchers that evening focusing on not only the economic development issues but livestock profitability.

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting and enhancing an economically viable, environmentally sound and socially sustainable agriculture through public policy and educational efforts. For more information on the Kansas Rural Center and the resources it offers farm families and their communities, log onto the Center's web site: www.kansasruralcenter.org.

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CUTLINE Information:

Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture Dean Weldon Sleight is passionate about stopping the exodus of young people from America's farms and rural communities. Sleight recently addressed board members of the Kansas Rural Center at that group's summer meeting in Soldier, Kan.