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2024 USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum Future Leaders in Agriculture Program

Essay: The Greatest Challenge Facing Agriculture Over the Next 5 Years

I am the seventh generation raised on my family ranch in the small town of Mason, Texas. My upbringing involved hands-on experience at the Mason Feed Store, a business my parents now recently own. My father's journey there began two decades ago as a feed boy, loading feed for customers. The store was known for its early morning coffee regulars, who engaged in lively discussions reminiscent of their ranching and farming experiences – both the triumphs and challenges.

The agricultural industry has navigated numerous obstacles and continues to confront unprecedented challenges that will shape its future over the next five years. While all issues are crucial, I find education and communication to be foundational. Perhaps my bias stems from my undergraduate degree in agricultural communications, but allow me to elaborate.

During my undergraduate studies, I represented Texas Tech University, Texas, and the United States at the United Nations University Scholars Leadership Symposium in Bangkok, Thailand. There, I delved into the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all member states in 2015. These goals serve as a collective roadmap for global peace and prosperity, emphasizing urgent action in areas such as poverty alleviation, improved health and education, reduced inequality, economic growth, climate change mitigation, and the preservation of oceans and forests. Notably, these goals orbit around the agricultural industry, calling attention to its vital role. According to a 2022 World Health Organization release, 828 million people suffered from hunger—an increase of 46 million from the previous year. As the agricultural industry grapples with climate change impacts and diminishing arable land, addressing this issue requires a closer look at the role of small family-owned farms.

Traditionally passed down through generations, these family operations face an alarming trend of decline. While technology is transforming the agricultural landscape, smaller family-owned farms often lack access to these advancements, putting them at a disadvantage compared to larger commercial entities. To address this disparity, supporting family-owned operations with updated technology and sustainable practices could retain ability within the industry and help feed the growing global population. Balancing resources and technology more equitably could contribute significantly to achieving at least four of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, including reducing inequalities, ending hunger, fostering sustainable agriculture, and ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns.

However, the accessibility of resources for family-owned operations is just one facet of a broader concern that the agricultural industry faces—communication and education. With a diminishing interest in the field, there is an urgent need for agriculturally educated communicators to advocate for the industry's needs outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. This involves not only recognizing and addressing specific challenges, such as family-owned operation accessibility but also instilling a deeper understanding of the industry's demands through education.

Choosing to major in agricultural communications was my decision to become a storyteller and advocate for an industry that is the backbone of life. The "six a.m. coffee drinkers" at the feed store emphasized the importance of this role. The most significant threat to the industry lies in losing the essence and momentum of agriculture, a concern highlighted by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, addressing the accessibility issue for family-owned operations begins with providing them the education to adapt and communicate effectively in response to the industry's evolving demands.

So, when the sun sets over my family ranch in Mason, Texas, I reflect on the journey that brought me to this moment—the seventh generation tending to the land that runs through our veins. The Mason Feed Store, now in the capable hands of my parents, echoes with the tales of my father's humble beginnings as a feed boy, loading feed for customers. The store's ambiance, flavored by the lively discussions of early morning coffee regulars, served as a testament to the collective wisdom born from decades of ranching and farming triumphs and challenges.

As I immerse myself in the realms of agricultural education and communication, I am drawn back to the moment when I represented my roots at the United Nations University Scholars Leadership Symposium in Bangkok, Thailand. There, I recognized the fundamental essence of spreading awareness about the significance of agriculture lies in communicating its interconnectedness. The agricultural industry, a resilient force that has weathered countless storms, now depends on education to become the catalyst, empowering family operations to adapt, communicate, and thrive in a world with ever-evolving demands.