

FFA speaker will outline career opportunities in precision ag

Industry 'desperate' for high quality, trained workers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Precision agriculture offers many career opportunities for students, a Washington State University professor says.

James Durfey, senior instructor in WSU's Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and manager of WSU's Agriculture Technology and Management program, will address FFA members from 9 to 11 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 5, during the Spokane Ag Expo and Pacific Northwest Farm Forum.

Durfey's presentation will be "Career Opportunities Using Precision Agriculture."



Courtesy of Spokane Ag Expo

The presentations at the FFA session of the Pacific Northwest Farm Forum always draw a large crowd.

"We have more demand for our kids than I've ever seen before," Durfey said.

Last fall, global agribusiness Syngenta interviewed students from WSU for jobs, Durfey said.

The next big growth sector will be precision agriculture, a broad category that covers a lot of concepts, Durfey said.

Students who have adapted to operating software will be called upon for their hand-eye coordination to work with optical sensors and unmanned aerial systems, he said.

"These kids that want to be involved in agriculture,

there will be a demand for them," he said.

There's a gap right now between the need for skilled workers and the number of potential employees entering agricultural programs.

"The demand for good, well-educated kids is over the top," he said.

In 2006, Durfey said, 50 percent of the John Deere workforce was eligible for retirement or had 25 years of experience, which is typical of the entire industry.

"Many companies are desperate for good, quality, trained individuals," he said. "Even within the federal government, there is a growing gap between those that hold the knowledge and those that have come in."

Durfey recommends students learn math and science. They'll find a lot of direct applications for that education in the workforce, he said.

"They're going to have to focus at a two-year or four-year school on technical aspects and have a good understanding of the basics of biology, chemistry and math,

and then technical classes in that respective area," he said.

Many students will have to work with systems on mobile devices, or access them remotely to solve problems. Growers can now access tractor data from a mobile device, and Durfey said that technology will continue to grow.

"The industry as a whole needs to be investing in two-year and four-year schools to nurture these kids along so they can provide academic, financial opportunities," he said, calling for more internship programs. "They need to be looking out for themselves, saying, 'OK, we've got some rising stars — if you go out there and do this, we'll guarantee that you're going to go to work for us.'"

The majority of society doesn't understand the value of agriculture, but still relies on it, eating three meals a day, Durfey said.

"The opportunity in agriculture is wide open," he said. "Ag is hot, ag is in demand. Kids are needed desperately throughout all aspects of agriculture."



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