

# WHAT DOES YOUR FUTURE HOLD?

## Sustaining the aerial application industry

By Lindsay Barber, NAAA Manager of Communications



**H**ave you spent any time thinking about your future or the future of your business? If you're a business owner, are you working with other pilots to ensure someone will buy your business when you retire? If you're a new pilot, are you working toward the future of owning a business? It is never too early to start thinking about these types of questions and about what will happen to your business when you retire. It takes everyone involved in the aerial application industry to ensure that ag pilots will be around in the future.

Many operators in the aerial application industry bought their businesses from a family member: a father, grandfather or uncle. But there are several pilots who've entered this industry after spending their lives watching planes from a field, growing up on a farm or because they found that commercial flying would be boring. In order to have an aerial application industry in the future, we need to ensure there are pilots to do the work; potential pilots are found everywhere.

Brandon Flexsenhar, a young pilot for Chuck Holzwarth Flying Service in Pekin, IL, got involved in aerial application because of a girl. Operator Dave Mitchell was the uncle of Flexsenhar's high school girlfriend, and Mitchell offered him a job working as part of his ground crew. After a week on the job, Flexsenhar decided he wanted to be an ag pilot. During his three years of ground crew experience, he worked to get his pilot's license and aerial application certification. Mitchell, Kevin Palmer (Mitchell's pilot) and Chuck Holzwarth all worked to make Flexsenhar into the pilot he is today.

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“To sustain the aerial application industry for future ag pilots, we need to continue to recruit young guys and embrace new technologies. It is difficult for ag pilots to embrace new technologies, such as variable rate, but we need to do it for the future. These new technologies will help us get the job done right, get the job done better and get the job done in less time,” said Flexsenhar.

At some point in the future, Flexsenhar plans to buy an operation. “While owners of operations have to market their business by knocking on farmers’ and co-ops’ doors all year long to gain their business, the few months of flying and spraying make it all worth owning a business.”

Tommy Owen, the young operator of Owen Flying Service in Edison, GA, says he has been fond of ag aviation since his childhood “My father was a farmer and I grew up watching the Ag Cats spraying on a daily basis. My grandfather would take me to the airstrips and we would sit there and watch them take off and land for hours. I would take small toy airplanes and spray the house furniture and rugs when I was little, so I consider myself lucky because I knew what I wanted to do when I was 3 years old.”

In 1998, Owen decided to make the jump from Georgia state trooper to ag pilot. On his days off from duty, he would spend time spraying for local farmers. When he realized he really wanted to fly for a living, he went to the bank and begged them to loan him the money to buy a plane. “It was a very hard sell for me to make, but they finally loaned me the money to buy a 450 Ag Cat. Then I went to work with an operator to gain additional experience and I kept my five customers who I’d always sprayed for. While I worked with an operator to gain experience, I figured out how to do the business by myself.”

Owen stated, “I hope to be in this business for the long haul and I hope to be flying as long as there is a need for crop dusters and I am physically able to fly safely. I am lucky because where I currently live is where I grew up, so a lot of my business comes from the farmers who’ve known me my entire life. I try to provide the best honest and dependable service, which is what all pilots need to do to sustain their businesses.”

Owen is worried about the future of farmers and agrees with several other applicators that the federal government needs to help the farmers more than they currently do. “The farmers are in critical times right now. If the farmer is always making money, they will hire ag pilots to do work and pilots will be around for hundreds of years.”

Randy Hardy, owner of Hardy Aviation Insurance, wrote an article in the March/April 2005 *Agricultural Aviation* magazine issue titled “Insuring New Pilots in the Aerial Application Industry.” In the article, Hardy stated, “[One of the ways] to consider getting into the business is to buy into an existing operation or start your own business—in this case it’s important to note that no insurance carrier will start a new pilot in his or her own business

without that operation retaining a seasoned pilot or hiring a seasoned pilot to act as chief pilot for at least two years.”

Pilot Matt Hovdenes, 28, chose this career because he knew that living his life as an airline pilot would not be fulfilling. Growing up, he had a strong interest in aviation, so he geared his education toward becoming an ag pilot. While looking at colleges, he picked a school that offered ag flying as an option and graduated with a bachelor’s in agronomy and ag aviation.

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***— Brandon Flexsenhar, Pilot,  
Chuck Holzwarth Flying Service, Pekin, IL***

Hovdenes’ big break into the aerial application industry happened because of his agronomy degree. His career started when he scouted fields; he eventually landed a job working for an operator as ground crew. After some time, he was able to start flying an old airplane and spraying easy jobs. After a few years, he said he was “finally considered a real ag pilot.”

Hovdenes’ ultimate goal is to own an operation, but he is worried about the amount of young pilots currently in the industry. “There aren’t a lot of pilots in my age group. One challenge for young pilots is getting insurance because younger pilots lack experience. Pilots are also now flying equipment that is more expensive than a couple of decades ago. If insurance was easier to obtain, younger pilots might be attracted to the industry.”

According to Terry Gage, president of the California Agricultural Aircraft Association (CAAA), “In the last couple of years, the operators in our state have started thinking about and training apprentice pilots. Up until a few years ago, California had an abundance of pilots, but that has changed. As the pilot population ages, we are facing a real shortage of qualified pilots. This affects not only the ability of an operator to service his current customer base; what about his own retirement? These operations are only as valuable as long as there are buyers. Training a new pilot benefits not only current needs, but it could create an operator’s exit strategy for his own retirement.”

Jim Avery, past president of NAAA and owner of Savannah Agri-Air in Savannah, NY, brought on a pilot a

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couple of years ago when he realized that he had to stop flying. Avery owns the company and the customer base, but his pilot does all the spraying. At some point, he assumes the pilot may have an interest in buying the business. He saw it as a potential alternative to leaving the business right now.

"I would encourage anyone in the industry who has a growing business to start bringing in other pilots who one day may be interested in taking over the business. We think we are going to fly forever, but that's not the reality. Pilots with growing businesses should think about bringing in the younger pilots and sell them small amounts of the business at a time," stated Avery.

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***—Terry Gage, President,  
California Agricultural Aircraft Association (CAAA)***

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Do your part to help recruit new pilots into aerial application!

- Always maintain your professionalism. As you've just read, kids watched ag pilots growing up and chose this profession because of the pilots flying the planes.
- Have a booth and speak at your local college's and high school's career days. Invite students to your operation if they show a strong interest in being an ag pilot.
- Hire college- and high-school age students to work at your operation as ground crew during their school breaks.
- Submit press releases to local newspapers about the industry. Many people read local newspapers and a press release about our industry may bring awareness and education to people interested in the industry.
- Obtain "Why... Because?" brochures from NAAA and hand them out at local events. For brochures, send an e-mail to [information@agaviation.org](mailto:information@agaviation.org) or call the NAAA office at (202) 546-5722.

Hardy believes that future pilots should go to school and then work with an operator to build time or find an operator who is willing to work with a new ag pilot to gain experience. He also stated, "A lot of today's operators are starting to age a bit and it may be time to consider your exit strategy. Maybe taking a chance with a new pilot will be the ticket to a successful transition, while insuring the industry continues to grow and stay healthy." ✂