The Importance of Agriculture Cannot be Undersold

By Jason Fearneyhough, Director, Wyoming Department of Agriculture

As students at universities and colleges around the country dive into the spring semester of school, it's unfortunate that many of them may have to spend time defending their major as a result of a story on the internet. Recently, The Daily Beast by Newsweek, Yahoo and many others posted articles claiming Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Sciences were among the most "useless" degrees for students to obtain based on the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2012 Job Outlook study. In the study, 1,000 employers were asked about their hiring plans and Business, Accounting and Computer/Information Science majors received the highest ranking by employers prioritizing them for recruitment.

The study may be able to draw some valid conclusions to what those 1,000 employers surveyed are looking for, but it's incredibly short-sighted and out of touch to draw sweeping conclusions based on such a small, targeted sample of employers. In fact, unlike this article and study suggest, the value of ag-related degrees cannot be taken lightly. Don't get me wrong, business, accounting and computer sciences are important, but without agriculture fulfilling life's most essential elements, none of these degrees mean anything. In fact, no other industry can provide the necessities our population needs to survive except agriculture. Shelter, fiber for clothing, and most importantly, food for our growing population is only provided by agriculture.

While a declining number of farms and ranches as well as an increasing average age of farmers and ranchers could be construed as a negative, in reality this equals a lot of opportunity for a stable, viable and fulfilling career for the next generation of workers. USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, recently said that the United States will need "100,000 new farmers over the next few years" and brought the National FFA Organization into the farm bill discussion, challenging its leaders to develop recommendations that would encourage more young people to pursue

careers in farming.

Along with this, agriculture based jobs aren't just about managing a farm or ranch. Agriculture degrees can be utilized in a broad range of areas like sales representatives, research scientists, quality assurance, marketing and engineers, just to name a few. Agriculture based majors also have applications and uses in areas like food safety, law, banking, public health, energy development and more. There may be a shift in the type of agriculture jobs available, but there is still an undeniable need for ag degrees and great minds to pursue those degrees. Students earning ag-degrees today are the same people who will chart the course of our future in agriculture and will innovate to meet the challenges we continue to face.

I understand those involved in agriculture or already seeking a career in agriculture understand the faults in this study, but it's important these misperceptions about agriculture are stopped as soon as possible. The simple fact is that there is a high possibility that there will be 9 billion people to feed, clothe and provide shelter for by 2050. And more than likely, this population explosion will need to be supported with fewer resources, more regulations and less understanding of where our food comes from and what it takes to get it from the farm or ranch to your table. We can't afford to have a population that doesn't value agriculture or understand the overwhelming importance of this industry.

Thankfully, those in the agriculture industry recognize the need for outreach and continue to work hard to educate and advocate for agriculture. The industry continues attempts to educate the country about agriculture through various educational programs and efforts. I am constantly amazed by the young people who have chosen to pursue agriculture as their career and the passion they show advocating for their future. So if your kid comes home and tells you they are declaring an ag-based major, don't panic based on weak science and short sighted surveys. Smile and be happy that your kid is pursuing a stable, fulfilling and important career that provides the basic needs we all need to survive.