

*The U.S. Labor Department is proposing new rules for child farm workers that would keep many from driving tractors, using big equipment and working with livestock. Labor officials say the rules are needed because farming is one of the nation's most dangerous occupations. The National Safety Council says nearly 29 out of every 100,000 farm workers die on the job.*

OMAHA (AP) — From tending cattle to driving tractors or ATVs, 15-year-old Taylor Muller and her three younger brothers have always done what they could to help the family's farming business.

"Most kids my age don't even have jobs," said Taylor, who assists her father at one southwest Oklahoma farm and her grandparents at another. "We already know what hard work is."

Many other young kids won't be allowed to do those kinds of chores if the U.S. Labor Department approves new rules on children working in agriculture.

While the Mullers would likely be exempt because it's a family business, the proposed rules would prohibit most children under age 16 from driving tractors, using power equipment, working with livestock in certain circumstances and doing work at heights over 6 feet.

Federal officials say the rules are needed because farming is one of the nation's most dangerous occupations, but many farmers say children learn important life lessons and might develop an interest in agriculture by working on farms or ranches.

Muller's dad, Matt, says he worries about what the new rules might mean for the future of farming.

"It's very disheartening to me," he said. "Farming is not just a business. It's a way of life."

Michael Hancock, the assistant administrator for policy at the Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division, said the rules covering child farm workers haven't been updated in more than 40 years and that changes are needed to address the dangers of working with tractors and other large farm machines.

Farming, he said, is "the single-most hazardous occupation, as measured by fatalities, for children."

Nearly 29 out of every 100,000 farm workers in the U.S. die on the job, according to the National Safety Council. Among workers ages 15 to 24, the rate is about 21 deaths per 100,000 workers. Statistics for workers younger than 15 aren't available because there isn't enough data on them.

Hancock compared the proposed rules, which mostly apply to farm employees between the ages of 12 and 16, to those prohibiting a teenager from operating a meat slicer in a restaurant or a cardboard compactor in a grocery store.

"There's any number of things kids can do on a farm that will be totally unaffected by these regulations," Hancock said. For instance, he said, they can still detassel corn, haul hay and feed cattle.

Hancock also said he supports the proposed exemptions in the rules for children working on their parents' farms or on farms where a parent is a main operator.

"If the parents are responsible for what goes on on that farm, they're uniquely able to judge those risks," Hancock said.

Nebraska farmer Shane Meyer worries those exemptions won't cover someone like him

because the farm with about 2,500 hogs that he runs near Beatrice, is owned by someone else. The rules may not be much of a problem for Meyer's boys, who do yard work and help care for the hogs, because one is already 16 and the other will turn 16 next year, but they would make it hard for him to hire any of his employees' or neighbors' kids.

"It's not the farms that are going to suffer. It's the kids," he said.

Agricultural groups say the parental exemption raises a lot of questions because many farms or ranches today are technically owned by limited liability corporations or other entities even if they are run by families. They say the proposed rules simply aren't clear about how they would apply to various ownership structures.

Matt Muller, who grows wheat and cotton on about 2,000 acres near Altus, Okla., said young cousins and nephews have helped out on his farm, but that might not be possible under the new rules. Plus, he wouldn't be able to hire neighbor kids.

He also wonders how his children would be affected if he and his wife switched the ownership to a limited liability corporation.

A fourth-generation farmer with four children under age 16, Muller said he hopes they will follow him into the business but worries they won't if they don't get interested in farming early.

He grew up driving tractors and sweeping out grain bins and said it's a lifestyle he doesn't think labor officials understand.

"They may have legitimate safety concerns, but I don't think they've spent much time on a farm," he said.

For instance, the proposed rules would prohibit the use of any sort of electronic or communication device while operating a tractor, but it's common practice to use two-way radios or cell phones to communicate between tractors, trucks and combines in the field. And many modern tractors come equipped with GPS systems and other electronics that teens might not be able to use.

The National Pork Producers Council, Farm Bureau chapters in several states and other major agriculture groups have organized to oppose the proposed rules. Officials in agricultural states also have questioned the wisdom of the changes.

Iowa Cattlemen chief executive Matt Deppe said he believes the new rules would make it harder for young people to get the hands-on experience they need to become interested in agriculture.

"I see them as creating a barrier for young people interested in the business," said Deppe, who grew up on a farm and learned to drive a tractor at age 10.

And Oklahoma Farm Bureau President Mike Spradling, who raises pecans near Sand Springs, said he didn't think the rules were needed because farmers and ranchers weren't likely to assign teenagers to the most dangerous jobs.

"Having young people around to help with the daily chores is a big help, and it frees up employees to do some of the more dangerous work," he said,

The Labor Department can only regulate employer-employee relationships, so Hancock said the proposed rules shouldn't affect 4-H, Future Farmers of America or other educational programs. And, they may not keep children from helping on their grandparents' or uncle's farms if they aren't paid.

"I think there is a clear path forward for kids who want to pursue agriculture as a career," Hancock said.