

Gary LaGrange - SAVE

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The Chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Agricultural Appropriations is calling the hearing to order in Washington, DC. Today this committee is learning about an innovative project which will help veterans and wounded warriors transition into healing careers in agriculture. A proposed location for this national model facility is in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Gary LaGrange is President of Soldier Agricultural Vocational Education or SAVE for short. As a retired garrison commander at Fort Riley, Gary knows first-hand about the needs of soldiers and veterans.

Gary grew up on a farm in Iowa. He joined the Army, served in Viet Nam and worked his way up through the ranks. After multiple tours overseas, his final post before retiring was at Fort Riley. He found that he enjoyed beekeeping as a hobby, and he observed that soldiers who helped him seemed to benefit from the experience.

Gary's daughter Shari is a clinical psychologist specializing in post traumatic stress disorder and brain injuries of wounded warriors. In 2012, she recommended that a training farm for veterans and transitioning soldiers would be of great value to them. Gary started to explore the idea, including therapy and clinical support.

Meanwhile, occupational therapists at Fort Riley's Warrior Transition Battalion asked Gary to develop a beekeeping training program for soldiers, which he did. He then organized educational tours to farms and farm support organizations near the fort. "The results were extraordinarily positive," Gary said.

Gary met extensively with Kansas State University faculty and others. He found strong support for this idea from the College of Agriculture, and especially from the Department of Biological and Agricultural Engineering's AgrAbility program for farmers with a disability. The College of Architecture volunteered to do a class project of developing designs for the training farm, using 155 acres of land owned and farmed by retired K-State professor Marvin Hachmeister.

This acreage is contiguous to Fort Riley and close to K-State. It's located in a peaceful setting between Manhattan and the rural community of Keats, which has a population of perhaps 100 people. Now, that's rural.

As Gary thought about the needs of the 800,000 soldiers who will be transitioning from the military to civilian life, he learned about the need for new farmers. Forty percent of farms are owned and operated by farmers over age 65, and 63 percent of farms are in their last generation of family ownership. In the next fifteen years, an estimated one million new farmers will be needed. This project can help respond to both needs: Soldiers seeking a healing occupation, and farmers needing a new generation of successors.

In December 2015, Soldier Agricultural Vocational Education was officially formed as a non-profit organization in Kansas. A Board of Directors was created with diverse membership, chaired by former general Mike Dodson. Full disclosure: I serve on this board also.

Current plans for the SAVE farm include training on crops such as wheat, corn, soybeans, grain sorghum, alfalfa, produce and an orchard, plus cattle, sheep, goats, swine,

horses and poultry. The complex of buildings on the farm would include a clinic, chapel, residences for 100 students and family, greenhouse, commercial kitchen, and more. By connecting with K-State, this model could be replicated at land-grant universities across the nation.

SAVE was selected by the federal administration as one of the top ideas with potential to help produce beginning farmers. Gary was chosen to present the idea at the White House in February 2016.

Senator Jerry Moran has been very supportive of this idea and invited Gary to testify before his subcommittee. As one farm organization put it, “The creation of the SAVE Farm would be a win-win situation for both agriculture and the military.” Another letter said: “When agricultural training is coupled with a therapy center, as proposed by the SAVE Project, such an approach can literally save lives.”

For more information, see www.thesavefarm.org.

It’s time to leave Washington, DC, where the SAVE project is being highlighted before a national, Congressional panel. We commend Gary LaGrange and all those involved with SAVE for making a difference by helping those who serve, and those who farm.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.