

Every day after school, Matt Muller's four children come home to help on Martha Valley Farms, the land in Jackson County that has been in the family for 25 years. Sometimes their cousin, Muller's nephew, comes home with them. If the U.S. Department of Labor's proposed changes to child labor regulations go into effect, it would be illegal for his nephew to continue lending a hand, Muller said. Changes would also prevent other young family members from spending the summer on Martha Valley and would stop the children from helping their grandfather plant and irrigate his farm, Muller said. The department is seeking comments through Dec. 1 on proposed changes that would stop children under 16 from doing what are considered to be the most dangerous farming jobs. Proposed changes include prohibiting young teens from riding on a tractor, herding and branding cattle, working inside a grain silo, working more than six feet off the ground and working with pesticides. The rule states that it applies only to hired farm workers and that children working on their parent or guardian's farm would continue to be exempt from regulations. However, the exemption does not apply to incorporated farms and many incorporated farms are also family operations. The changes are meant to make children safer, but many who have reacted to the proposed changes feel they are unnecessary. Critics say the rules will take from young teens the opportunity to fall in love with agriculture. "I think there's people in the Department of Labor who have no real life experience or awareness of what goes on in a family farm, and in their zeal to protect children they're overreaching and misunderstanding how we take care of our kids and keep them safe," Muller said. His children, who range in age from 10 to 15 years old, are given strict training on how to do any job, Muller said. He said they are not allowed to perform tasks on their own until he and his wife, Kellie, make sure they understand the risks and are completely comfortable, Muller said. Only one of his kids has ever broken a bone, and it happened on a trampoline, Muller said.

There were 15,012 farm injuries affecting youth under 20 years of age in 2009, according to the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety. The center is part of a private medical research institution. Agriculture has the second-highest fatality rate among young workers, almost six times the fatality rate across all industries, according to the center. Accidents can happen on farms, but they can also happen in every area of life, said Mike Spradling, president of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau and a rancher in Sand Springs for over 40 years. "We are surrounded day to day with certain risks, and the sooner we start to deal with those risks the better the odds are of being successful," Spradling said. "I think that's the one thing young people in the agriculture culture get to learn at a very young age. It prepares young men and women for life's challenges much earlier." The agriculture community has a responsibility to provide a safe environment for workers of all ages and has done so, Spradling said. Farm work instills responsibility and compassion in young people and provides an educational lab to learn sciences such as zoology and horticulture, he said. "There's no other place in the world they can achieve those things. The lessons learned here are more than what can be learned in a textbook," Spradling said. Jack Staats, supervisor of agricultural education for Oklahoma, said he is proud of the opportunities public school agricultural education programs provide for students to use what they learn in the classroom in real-world, supervised situations. He said he does not want the regulations to affect the training of young farm workers by taking away on-farm learning opportunities. "I respect the thought process to make it safer, but I question who is going to train these young people and nourish their love of agriculture if they're not allowed to participate and be a part of it," Staats said. "There's a vast number of farms anymore that have to depend on neighbor kids, nephews and nieces, and if we limit them to where they can't do anything until they're 16 years of age, that really bothers me." Reighly Blakley,

15, is part of the agricultural education at program at Oologah-Talala High School. As part of the program, the sophomore tours the state to speak about Oklahoma agriculture, shows cattle and hogs and sells the vegetables she raises at farmers markets in Tulsa and Owasso. In October, Blakley was named one of four national finalists for the vegetable production award at the National FFA Convention. Blakley, her siblings and her cousins grew up helping in the family's plant nursery and on the ranch where they raise cattle, hogs and sheep. "I think it's helped me with major leadership skills and responsibility because I can't just decide one day I don't want to get up and feed my cattle. They have to be fed. That responsibility's impacted my life in a major way," Blakley said. "I think it will help me when I get older and get a job. I know I can't just decide 'I don't want to go to work today.'" Blakley, who wants to be an agricultural lawyer when she grows up, does not think the proposed regulation changes that she knows of are necessary. She has worked alongside her father stacking hay and herding cattle on horseback since she was young, both jobs that the proposed regulations could prohibit some young workers from doing. She has also been inside a pen with a bull, or with a cow and her calf, and says that young people who have grown up on a ranch know it is necessary to be careful in these situations and should not be banned from performing them. Blakley, who was given her first bottle-calf when she was 4 years old, now has around 40 cattle in her name and shows steers and heifers nearly every weekend. She loves having the opportunity to watch an animal grow from birth to adulthood, she said. "Not every kid gets to do this," Blakley said. "I feel privileged to be part of a family that has been in the farming and ranching business for a long time." Casey Smith 918-732-8106 casey.smith@tulsaworld.com SUBHEAD: Many say new farm labor rules aren't needed protecting kids: farm work laws under review Original Print Headline: Labor

dispute