



**EXCITED ABOUT AG:** Springport agriscience teachers Jeremy Glaspie and Megan Merrill (both at left) and Pat Henne (at far right) stand with the school's leadership class in front of what could be the country's largest FFA jacket. By having an agriscience program, students can voluntarily be part of the FFA organization.

# Educators face challenges

By JENNIFER VINCENT

**I**N Michigan, if you want a degree in agriculture, you go to Michigan State University. It's that simple. Or is it?

While some community colleges offer ag courses, no other institutions offer undergraduate degrees in agriculture, largely due to a lack of resources. This poses challenges for students wanting to pursue careers in agriculture as it becomes more difficult to get into MSU.

MSU and the Michigan Association of Agriscience Educators are concerned about the decline of new agriscience educators in the state and are looking at ways to address the situation. "We're in a quandary across the country," says Randy Showerman, state supervisor for agricultural education. "We have a deficit of agriscience educators with more openings than candidates."

## Obstacles

In 2000, Kyle Fiebig, who is now the agriscience teacher at Montague High School and MAAE president, completed his undergraduate degree in agriscience education with 11 other students. But, unlike other universities that offer teaching degrees in three and a half years with 12

## Key Points

- Agriscience educators must student teach for a full year.
- Demand is increasing for agriscience educators with broader-based certificates.
- The National FFA goal is to have 10,000 agriscience programs by 2015.

weeks of student teaching, MSU requires another full year of student teaching for all teaching certifications.

The teaching internship requires 24 master-level credits, which today costs \$385.65 per credit, plus a \$400 matriculation fee each. Some contend the extra time and cost is a detriment to the program, luring potential ag teachers into industry positions or prompting students to get their education out of state.

While MSU is not discussing adjusting those standards, it did pass an emergency provision that allowed Fiebig and other graduating students to fill an extreme shortage of ag teachers in 2000, caused by retirements that could have shuttered five programs.

"I was working full time and completing my student teaching at the same time," Fiebig says. "It was really tough, but without it, the state would have lost 500 FFA members and 625 ag students."

MSU has also made some other changes. Recognizing the financial and academic struggles some students face in trying to get into MSU, the university recently started offering a connection between the two-year ag tech certification program and a four-year degree.

"For students who complete the ag tech program with a minimum 3.0 GPA and complete college-level math and writing courses, they can transfer those credits one for one into the four-year program," explains Showerman. "For students with financial considerations or

would like to live at home, we urge them to work with community colleges to take courses that will transfer to MSU."

Dave Krueger, special project consultant for MAAE and a former MSU assistant professor, says another option might be to offer distance education, meaning students could take ag courses from Iowa, Purdue or other universities online or through satellite connection.

"If enough classes were offered, students could transfer those credits to a Michigan university that might be willing to offer a minor in agriculture. With a science-based major, like biology, students could then go on to get certified to teach," he says. "Why wouldn't a school like Central Michigan University look at offering a degree in agriculture?"

## Changing needs

In the past 20 years, 55 agriscience programs in Michigan have closed largely

because there weren't teachers to fill vacancies. In the last few years that trend has slowed, but Michigan's new Merit Curriculum and declining enrollments around the state are creating more demand for agriscience educators with broader-based certificates. Ag educators from MSU receive a certificate in career and technical education, as well as secondary teaching certificates with vocational certification.

Showerman says, "We're seeing an increasing need for ag educators to have an Integrated Science Endorsement, which allows them to teach chemistry, physics, astronomy and other science courses. Some districts cannot support a full-time ag educator and will need teachers in these other areas to meet the new requirements."

That was exactly the case for Bronson High School, a small Class C school in Branch County. It lost its long-standing



**HANDS ON:** Students in Pat Henne's Springport agriscience class move pastured turkeys to a new paddock. While many districts do not have an agriscience program at all, Springport has grown its program over the last several years and now has three agriscience teachers.

## Newly qualified agricultural education teachers, 2005-06

	Newly qualified	Teaching in state
Illinois (4 universities)	36	25
Ohio State University	34	13
University of Minnesota	31	12
Wisconsin (3 universities)	29	7
Purdue University	18	12
Iowa State University	13	6
Penn State University	12	6
Michigan State University	1	0