

Ag a fitting post-military mission for many veterans

By Amy Mayer (/authors/322-amy-mayer)



Jeanette Lombardo,
Farmer Veteran Coalition

As the nation pauses to honor veterans this week, several groups that work with veterans in agriculture are celebrating the skills they contribute and the opportunities available.

Jeanette Lombardo took the helm at the Farmer Veteran Coalition (<https://farmvetco.org/>) in July and says the widespread impacts of the pandemic have taken a toll on veterans in agriculture alongside everyone else.

"In the midst of COVID, our focus here at our national headquarters in California is just helping our growers and ranchers through some financial stress, to put it mildly," she says.

Interest in the organization is growing, and Lombardo says 11 new chapters are forming and will join the 15 that already exist. Membership helps connect new farmers with more experienced ones and also makes producers eligible for the Homegrown By Heroes label program, which is one of the benefits that has helped some veterans pivot to direct marketing during the pandemic. She says while consumers were panic-buying and then forced to eat almost entirely from their own kitchens, many turned to local farms.

"What brought peace was the small farmers in the rural communities saying, 'it's okay, I'm here. I'm your neighbor; I'm right down the road'," she said. Farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture put fresh fruit and vegetables within reach for many families, and Lombardo says local buying also boomed in some urban communities, where there are also veterans working to grow food.

"The service never stops," she says, "it just goes from military to farming."

The Farmer Veteran Coalition aims to help anyone with military experience pursue a career in agriculture, whether as a farmer or rancher, an urban gardener or in an allied field. The group offers fellowships and is developing more ways to pair people entering agriculture with those who are looking to retire or who are launching start-ups within the industry. Lombardo says mentorships, apprenticeships and internships all can be facilitated through the FVC network. The Western Growers Center for Innovation and Technology (<https://www.wginnovation.com/>) also supports veterans in agriculture and this week held a webinar to recognize some of the benefits of hiring veterans. Navy veteran Amy Tomlinson, who now works for Concentric Power, says military training prepares people for the demands of the business world. Functioning as part of a tight-knit group in which each person at times has to depend on others for survival, both fosters teamwork and demands creativity in the face of adversity. Tomlinson says the work ethic, communication skills and time management necessary to succeed in the military are assets in the private sector.

"They're going to ask you questions if they don't understand, but otherwise you kind of wind 'em up and let them go and they're going to get the job done," she says.

What's more, with a high percentage of servicemembers coming from rural communities, many have had farming experience before the military and want to return to their hometowns. Concentric Power, which provides microgrids including for ranches and other ag businesses, has offices in Silicon Valley and the Salinas Valley.

"One of the questions I get pretty often is, 'How are you finding good talent in the Salinas Valley compared to a much larger talent pool up in the Silicon Valley?'," CEO Brian Curtis says, "and one of the answers is, we've had great luck with veterans." For more news, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com (<http://www.Agri-Pulse.com>).