



Everything Michigan

## Kids can keep working on family farms under the old rules -- for now -- U.S. Department of Labor says

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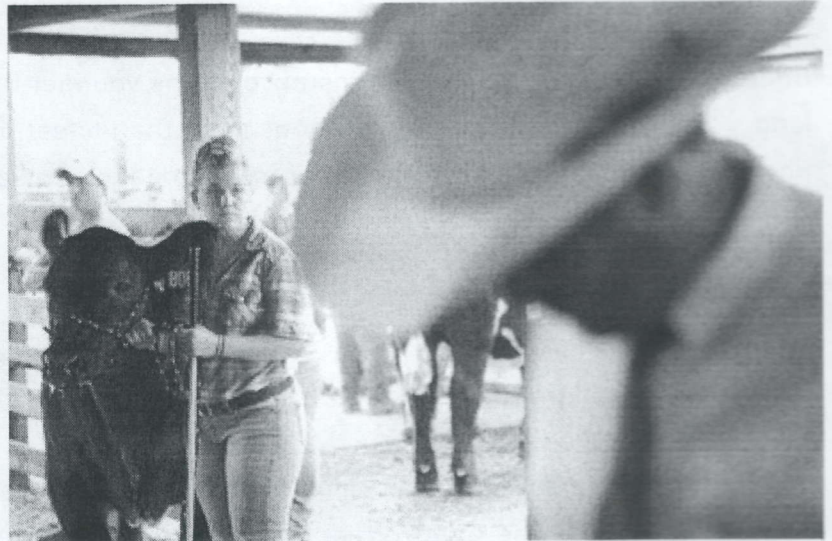
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By

**KALAMAZOO** — It's still not clear what kind of farm work youngsters will be allowed to perform under new rules proposed by the U.S. Department of Labor.

But for now, at least, kids can keep working on the family farm, as long as the business is at least partially owned by mom or dad or someone standing in for parents.

That was the gist of an announcement today by the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division today that it is rethinking — and will re-propose— the "parental exemption" portion of its **proposed rules on child labor in agriculture.**



Jonathon Gruenke / Gazette

Abby Wilson, left, of Galesburg looks to the crowd while holding her steer, Buddy, before a 4-H livestock auction at the Kalamazoo County Fair. Critics of proposed revisions to child labor laws worry that many youth livestock handling opportunities would be nixed under the proposed changes. Today the Department of Labor announced it will re-propose one portion of the revisions.

The parental exemption is the part of the labor rules that has traditionally allowed kids to work on their own family farms. It allows children of any age who are employed by their parent, or a person standing in the place of a parent, to perform any job on a farm owned or operated by their parent or the person standing in the place of a parent.

The changes as originally proposed last fall would have required that a farm be fully owned by parents in order for the exemption to apply.

That's the part that will be re-proposed, though it is unclear how the wording might change. The department will continue to review the comments already received, and the new comments to come when a new comment period is opened on the re-proposal, officials said.

The decision to re-propose came in response to requests from the public and members of Congress that the agency allow more input, agency officials said.

The Department of Labor will ask for ideas about how the department can best protect children while still respecting rural traditions, they said in a telephone press conference Wednesday.

"I think that it's a great first step," said Ryan Findlay, national legislative counsel for Michigan Farm Bureau, of Wednesday's announcement.

But concerns remain, he said: What will the final wording be on the parental exemption? How many other changes may make it into the final order, slated for adoption in August according to the Department of Labor's website?

Under the proposed changes, for instance, teens younger than 16 working for hire on farms would no longer be allowed to ride on hay wagons more than 6 feet off the ground, to milk cows, feed cattle or use power washers, drive a lawn tractor or move irrigation equipment, according to a handout prepared by Michigan Farm Bureau.

"There are still a lot of question marks," Findlay said Wednesday.

"I think it's safe to say that every single job is at risk," he said. For instance, in several rural communities in Southwest Michigan, he said, corn detassling is major employer, a major rite of passage, and a traditional step teens take to develop a work ethic. "It's not clear that would be able to continue," given the tractor-driven wagons and communications devices that are now part of that job.

Wednesday's announcement, Findlay said, "does absolutely nothing to clarify the rest of the issues.

"The farmers were dealt a little more confusion today— but a glimmer of hope," he said.