Sociology head expects to see 25 percent of farms in U.S. fail

By Deborah A. Haring Reporter

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As many as 25 percent of Ameris farmers could go out of business ithin the next five years, said Dr. teve Murdock, head of A&M's Deartment of Rural Sociology.

According to the department's urveys of Texas farmers, 4.7 perent of Texas producers failed in arming between 1985 and 1986. These numbers are similar

ough to those from other parts of e country to predict that over the ext five years, up to 25 percent of ne nation's farmers will be forced to

top farming, Murdock said.
"We are having — and have had
the last few years — rates of faile among producers that are proortionately higher than any period nce the Great Depression," he said. The decline of farming has been a ntinuing problem for years. cording to the most recent Census Agriculture in 1982, Texas had 185,000 farms compared with er 380,000 in 1950.

What is different about those with current financial problems, how-ever, is their characteristics, Mur-dock said.

In the past, those leaving farming enerally have been falling into two tegories. Young adults who have en more profitable careers have one to college or pursued other op-ortunities rather than going into orming, Murdock said. Marginal oducers, those who were less efective, inefficient and unwilling to y new technologies, also have left

But the current farming crisis is affecting farmers who ordinarily would be successful, he said.

"Those who are failing are young, well-educated farmers in their 30s who are innovative and use well-developed forms of agricultural technology," Murdock said. "They are also willing to expand operations by taking in things like economics of scale and production which are normally associated with successful pro-

paid a significant amount of their debts when their assets and income fell, they were forced out of business, Murdock said.

To determine how a producer is doing financially in Texas, his debts are measured relative to his assets. If this debt-to-asset ratio is greater than 40 percent, the farmer is expe-

riencing financial stress, he said. In 1985, 24 percent of Texas producers had debt-to-asset ratios of

"We are having — and have had in the last few years rates of failure among producers that are proportionately higher than any period since the Great Depres-

- Dr. Steve Murdock, head of A&M's Department of Rural Sociology

Murdock said many of the failures have occurred because producers purchased land and equipment in the 1970s when interest rates and land values were high. Then in the 1980s, a number of macroeconomic policy changes led to a decrease in the export market and interest rates which resulted in a decline in land values and assets.

An overabundance of agricultural products in the market also forced commodity prices down and lowered many farmers' incomes, he said.

These farmers often still had high payments to make on land that now

over 40 percent. The largest farming area in Texas, the High Plains, had the highest debt-to-asset ratio in the state and Central Texas had the

Asset values as a whole declined by 20 percent for Texas producers between 1985 and 1986. To better explain the meaning of this, Murdock compares it to buying a \$100,000 home in 1985 and finding out in 1986 that the home is worth only \$80,000.

The problem is not confined to farms, Murdock said.

"The important thing to realize is that this is not simply a problem for

problem. It affects banks. It affects the small-town businessman and in turn all the employees of that busi-

Over 70 percent of the approximately 1,000 farmers surveyed in the random sample agree with Murdock. They think this crisis has impacted their communities, not only through the loss of business, but also through the loss of people from the area and a loss of community spirit,

Many farmers also said they have experienced severe depression, marriage and family conflicts and a loss

of possessions. In Texas, with the decrease of oil and gas prices and problems of producers, some people have been un-able to pay taxes. This creates a loss of government funds necessary to run community services such as schools, Murdock said.

Though Texas is not as severely impacted by debt levels as Iowa and other midwestern states, many of its farms are family-run and it is these middle-sized family farms that are failing most often, Murdock said. But even if 25 percent of Ameri-

ca's farmers go out of business, Mur-dock said, the average urban consumer in America won't know the difference.

"It probably won't affect the amount of products available or the price paid for these products," Mur-dock said. "Where it will be most evident will be in rural areas. Many rural towns will fall below the level where they are still viable as commu-

Officials to release Saragosa relief records

PECOS (AP) — Reeves County, pressured by exas Rural Legal Aid, has agreed to release rerds detailing what was done with donations for tims of the May 22 Saragosa tornado, a state ficial said Wednesday.

That action was prompted by a town meeting st week in which Saragosans petitioned visiting egal Aid attorneys to file suit against the county did not release all its records dealing with reef efforts for the disaster, Alpha Hernandez, lanaging attorney in Legal Aid's Del Rio office,

Saragosa, a small town about 25 miles south of ecos, was devastated by the May 22 tornado, hich hit during a kindergarten-graduation xercise, killing 30 people. Reeves County and some private organizations accepted donations to forward for the relief effort.

There have been several reports of lost or sto-len money and goods. In the latest incident, Juana Jaquez, the district clerk, reported last week that someone stole \$4,000 of tornado relief money that she was keeping in her car.

Hernandez said incidents like that have aroused Saragosans' suspicions that some county officials have been negligent or possibly dishonest in handling disaster donations.

uted it," Hernandez said.

The threat of a lawsuit prompted Reeves County Attorney Scott Johnson to offer Tuesday to turn over the records later this week, Hernan-

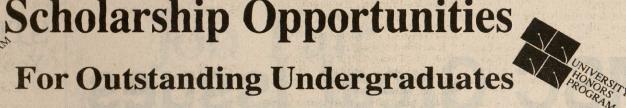
"We agreed to hold off on the lawsuit until we could review the material," Hernandez said.

Legal Aid, which is helping tornado victims with legal problems, filed an Open Records Act request Aug. 11, asking the county to release its tornado relief files.

"We had received only a partial response," she said, adding that only county officials peripher-ally involved in disaster relief responded. Officials more heavily involved, such as Sheriff Raul Florez, did not respond, she said.

"The request is to find out just who received the money, how much they received and what they did with it and on what basis they distrib-

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Deadlines: Applications due November 13.

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Application procedure: Direct application by student. Deadlines: Applications due November 13.

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