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HOMESTEAD

Save farmland by saving farmers first

BY KATIE EDWARDS

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My phone has been ringing off the hook for the last two weeks. Reporters, county commissioners and many others want to know how Miami-Dade County farmers feel about moving the urban development boundary (UDB) and the loss of farmland to development.

There's no question about it. The rising population has been a mixed blessing for growers. More people mean more demand for our crops. More people also mean a need for more homes, schools, roads and other public facilities.

When the question arose about whether or not to move the UDB, Farm Bureau put the question to the growers. The overwhelming response was simple. Farmers and nursery growers believe that market forces should determine the UDB.

A common concern echoes among our residents. Residents are concerned about taking land out of agricultural production.

Imagine this: You inherit a business from your father. You take out a loan to make improvements to continue the business. Outside forces, like cheap imported goods or a natural disaster, cause you three or four bad years of business.

You are losing money, you cannot pay your own bills, and you cannot repay the money you've borrowed on your loan. What do you do?

The same question plagues many commercial growers. For a grower, the first solution is not to sell the land. A commercial grower will explore every possible avenue before deciding to sell.

Now, let's imagine that you own a home. You've made considerable improvements to the home where you have watched your family grow. When you decide to sell your home, do you sell your home to the lowest bidder or do you take the best offer?

It is no different in agriculture, yet growers are singled out because of their location in a rural environment with natural beauty and green space. So often we hear, "Save the farmland, preserve the rural areas."

I can tell you that it is not possible unless you save the farmers. How do we save the farmers? We buy fresh fruits, vegetables and nursery crops with the "Fresh from Florida" logo. We urge Congress to implement mandatory Country of Origin Labeling which gives consumers the knowledge of, and the ability to choose, where their food is produced.

We urge Congress to pass balanced trade agreements that protect American agriculture and the jobs that go with it. We allow farmers to control their own destiny so they, too, can make good business decisions. We can win the war to save Florida agriculture if we stop creating battles in our backyards.