



2009 Summary Report

Introduction

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, the Farm Poll is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship are all partners in the Farm Poll effort. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farmers who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll.

Who Participates?

The 2009 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in January and February to a statewide panel of 2,201 farm operators. Usable surveys were received from 1,268 farmers, resulting in a

58 percent response rate. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old, and had been farming for 39 years. Fifty percent of farmers reported that farm income made up more than half of their overall 2008 household income, and an additional 20 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from farming. This report summarizes the results of the 2009 survey. Copies of this or any other year's reports are available from your local county Extension office, the Extension Distribution Center (www.extension.iastate.edu/store), Extension Sociology (www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll), or from the authors.

Highlights from the 2009 Poll

The Next Generation of Farmers

The farm population is aging nationwide, and Iowa farmers are no exception. As more farmers approach or reach retirement age, questions about retirement and farm succession plans increase in importance. The 2008 Farm Poll found that 42 percent of farmers planned to retire in the next five years. Among those farmers who planned to retire, only 56 percent had identified a successor. The 2009 Farm Poll

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asked participants about farm succession issues, including opinions about how their children chose their career paths, what factors figured into their own decisions to become farmers, and beliefs regarding different programs and initiatives that support beginning farmers.

Farmers were asked if they had adult children, and whether or not any of those children were farmers. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that they had adult children over 18 and not in school. Among those farmers who had adult children, 33 percent had at least one child who was currently farming. Of those, ten percent had multiple children who were farmers. Twenty-seven percent had at least one son who farmed and 11 percent had at least one daughter who farmed. The 735 farmers who were over 55—approaching retirement age—had 350 children who farmed, a proportion (48 percent) that represents less than half of the number that will be needed to replace the current generation of farmers as they retire.

Factors influencing children’s decisions to farm

We asked participants about the reasons and motivations that had factored into their children’s decisions to enter farming. The first set of questions focused on adult children who chose to farm. Farmers were provided with a series of reasons that could have figured into their children’s decisions to choose farming as their occupation and asked to rate their importance

on a five-point scale from “not important at all” to “very important.”

The motivation that received the highest rating was love of farming, with 80 percent of farmers indicating that it was either important or very important in their children’s decisions to become farmers (table 1). Following in importance were quality of life considerations and having grown up wanting to farm. Seventy-two percent of farmers rated these factors as having been important or very important criteria in their children’s decisions to farm. Ability to be their own boss (68 percent), desire to stay close to home (56 percent), desire to carry on family tradition (55 percent), and family ability to help get them started (55 percent) were also rated as important or very important by a majority of Farm Poll participants.

Several reasons were seen as relatively unimportant. Lack of other options was viewed as the least important factor, with 70 percent of farmers indicating that this item was unimportant or not important at all in their children’s decisions to farm (table 2). Fairly high percentages rated the following factors as unimportant or not important at all: family expectations to farm (58 percent), a spouse’s desire to farm (57 percent), low stress compared to other occupations (48 percent), and better income than other options (43 percent).

Taken together, these responses indicate that parents of children who farm believe that cul-

Table 1. Factors influencing children’s decisions to farm: High importance

	Not at All Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
	— Percentage —				
Love of farming.....	2	2	17	29	51
Quality of life.....	2	2	24	36	36
Grew up wanting to farm.....	5	4	19	30	42
Could be their own boss	5	4	22	38	30
Desire to stay close to home	9	11	24	34	22
Desire to carry on family tradition	8	8	29	29	26
Our family was able to help them get started.....	14	9	22	32	23

Table 2. Factors influencing children’s decisions to farm: Low importance

	Not at All Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
	—Percentage—				
Lack of other options.....	45	25	21	7	3
Family expectations to farm	29	29	25	9	8
Their spouse wanted to farm.....	38	19	19	14	11
Farming is less stressful than other occupations .	19	29	33	15	4
Better income than other options	16	27	37	14	6

tural and lifestyle factors weighed more heavily in their children’s decisions to farm than did economic criteria.

Factors influencing children’s decisions to choose another career

Having examined some of the reasons that influenced children’s choice to farm, we now turn to children who decided not to farm. Farm Poll participants with adult children who had not entered farming were asked to rate the importance of factors that may have motivated their children to select another occupation over farming.

In contrast to the factors influencing the decision to farm, most of the reasons that were rated as most important in the choice of a non-farm career were economic. The domi-

nant reason, by far, was that other occupations provided better income. Seventy-five percent of farmers indicated that this reason had been either important or very important in shaping their children’s decisions to go into a field other than farming (table 3). Following in importance were inability to afford the necessary equipment, land, livestock, and other factors of production (52 percent important or very important), high land rents (50 percent important or very important), high risk (45 percent important or very important), and low farm profits (43 percent important or very important). Among non-economic reasons, lack of interest in farming was the only one that approached 50 percent; 46 percent of farmers believed that lack of interest in farming was either important or very important in their children’s decision-

Table 3. Factors influencing children’s decisions to choose another career

	Not at All Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
	—Percentage—				
Other occupations provided better income.....	7	4	13	25	50
They could not afford to buy the necessary equipment, land, crop inputs, livestock, etc.	20	10	19	15	37
Land rents were too high.....	24	10	16	20	30
They were not interested in farming.....	21	12	22	19	27
There is too much risk in farming	21	11	23	21	24
Rental land was not available.....	26	11	18	15	30
Farm profits are too low.....	22	10	25	17	26
Their spouse was not interested in farming.....	32	11	17	14	25
Family expectations to find another occupation.....	32	17	25	14	12
They were not interested in living in the country...	44	17	18	11	10
Farming requires too much manual labor.....	40	22	19	10	9

making processes. Thirty-nine percent cited lack of interest on behalf of their children's spouses as having played an important or very important role.

Other reasons are notable for their relative lack of importance in their children's selection of non-farm professions. Conventional wisdom suggests that the level of manual labor involved in farming and the perceived isolation of rural life combine to discourage young people from entering farming. Farm Poll data do not support that view. Sixty-two percent of farmers cited that the labor demands of farming did not figure into their kids' decisions not to farm, and 61 percent felt that disinterest in rural living was a non-factor (table 3). Family expectations to find another occupation was also rated low on the importance scale, with 49 percent of farmers indicating that it was either unimportant or not important at all.

Factors influencing participants' decisions to choose farming

A final set of questions focused on the Farm Poll participants themselves, and the factors

that motivated them to choose farming as a career. Love of farming and quality of life topped the list, with 81 and 75 percent of participants expressing that these reasons had been either important or very important in their decisions to farm (table 4). The ability to be their own boss and a desire to farm while growing up also figured prominently, with around three-quarters of respondents scoring these factors as important or very important. Somewhat less significant, but still rated important or very important by approximately half of participants, were a desire to stay close to home (56 percent), a desire to carry on family tradition (54 percent), and family ability to help get them started (48 percent).

Several factors were rated relatively low on the importance scale. Sixty-four percent of Farm Poll participants rated having a spouse who wanted to farm as unimportant or not at all important in their decision to choose farming. Similarly, the absence of options aside from farming and family expectations to farm were regarded as unimportant by over 50 percent of participants. Levels of stress and income relative to other occupations also ranked low on

Table 4. Factors influencing Farm Poll participants' decisions to choose farming

	Not at All Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
	—Percentage—				
Love of farming.....	2	3	14	26	55
Quality of life.....	3	3	20	31	44
Could be my own boss.....	4	4	17	34	41
Grew up wanting to farm.....	4	6	15	25	49
Desire to stay close to home	10	10	24	29	27
Desire to carry on family tradition	12	11	23	21	33
My family was able to help me get started	23	9	20	24	24
Family expectations to farm	36	20	22	14	9
Farming is less stressful than other occupations	23	25	32	14	7
My spouse wanted to farm	47	17	17	11	8
Better income than other options	17	27	39	11	6
Lack of other options	41	20	25	9	5

the importance scale, with 48 and 44 percent of Farm Poll participants indicating that these factors had little influence over their choice of farming as an occupation.

On the whole, results suggest that for those individuals who chose farming as their career, cultural and lifestyle factors were the predominant reasons underlying that choice. Whether regarding their own decisions to farm, or their children's decisions, love of farming and quality of life issues were fundamental. On the other hand, for those children who did not choose to farm, parents' assessments clearly point to economic factors as the most important decision criteria, whether in the form of economic barriers to farm entry or better income opportunities elsewhere.

Programs to support beginning farmers

Beginning farmers face numerous challenges as they build their farm operations, and there are a number of organizations and programs that can help them to pursue their farming goals. We asked farmers to assess the need for several current and potential programs. Support was found to be strong for all of these initiatives, but especially so for programs that specifically target beginning farmers. Over 80 percent of

farmers rated the expansion of loan programs for beginning farmers and programs that link beginning farmers with retiring farmers as either needed or critically needed (table 5). Large percentages of farmers also indicated that mentoring programs that connect beginning farm families with established farm families (77 percent), expansion of beginning farmer tax credit programs (76 percent), outreach programs that link absentee landowners with beginning farmers (75 percent), and succession planning assistance for established farmers (74 percent) are needed or critically needed.

Potential initiatives that were not specific to beginning farmers also received high levels of endorsement as either needed or critically needed: farmer-led value-added agriculture initiatives (75 percent), development of markets for alternative crops (73 percent), and training in the production and marketing of non-traditional crops (65 percent). Overall, these results point to overwhelming support for a broad array of beginning farmer programs.

Farm Policy and Commodity Production

When the Farm Poll survey was mailed in January 2009, the 2008 Farm Bill had been in

Table 5. Need for beginning farmer support programs

	Not Needed	Uncertain	Needed	Critically Needed
	— Percentage —			
Expanded beginning farmer loan programs.....	7	10	46	37
Programs that link beginning farmers with retiring farmers.	7	11	50	32
Mentoring programs that connect beginning farm families with established farm families	10	14	55	22
Expanded beginning farmer tax credit programs.....	10	14	48	28
Outreach programs that link absentee landowners with beginning farmers	11	14	50	25
Support for farmer-led value-added agriculture initiatives....	9	16	52	23
Succession planning assistance for established farmers	11	14	50	24
Development of markets for alternative crops	10	17	48	25
Training programs on producing and marketing non-traditional crops for farmers' markets, restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions.....	17	19	48	17

effect for six months, giving farmers and the farming community some time to learn about changes and continuities in the legislation and reflect on what they might mean for them. The survey included questions that focused on farm policies and programs and their potential effects on farmers, farming practices, markets, and rural communities.

A first set of items allowed farmers to assess some general statements about the impacts of commodity programs. Two statements about ethanol policy received the highest levels of endorsement, with 72 percent of participants agreeing that federal ethanol policy had been good for Iowa farmers, and 71 percent supporting an increase in the percentage of ethanol that can be blended into gasoline (table 6). A third ethanol-related item—that ethanol policy should focus more on developing cellulosic and other non-grain forms of biofuels—earned much less support, with only 37 percent agreeing with that statement and 44 percent expressing uncertainty.

Farmers’ general assessments of commodity programs were uneven. Seventy percent of farmers agreed that every time the Farm Bill is renewed they worry about how changes will

affect their operations (table 6). This indicates that uncertainty about Farm Bill policies and programs can be a source of stress. On the other hand, a majority of participants also agreed that commodity programs have been good for most Iowa farmers (57 percent) and that they have served as an important safety net for their operations (55 percent). Finally, however, a sizeable minority (46 percent) of participants agreed that commodity programs favor agribusiness corporations over farmers.

A number of statements focused on the specialized production of commodities such as corn, soybeans, hogs, and cattle and the impacts of that specialization on farmers and rural communities. The statement “Profit margins on corn and soybeans get eaten up by land rents and input costs faster than they used to” received the highest levels of endorsement, with 86 percent of farmers in agreement (table 7). Seventy-two percent of farmers agreed that increasing specialization in commodities has led to the loss of farms, 68 percent agreed that they sometimes feel like they have little control over the profitability of their farms, 55 percent agreed that overreliance on corn and soybeans contributes to financial risk for row crop farm-

Table 6. Farm policy and commodity production, part 1

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
Federal ethanol policy has generally been good for Iowa farmers	3	6	19	54	18
The percentage of ethanol that can be blended into gasoline should be increased	3	6	21	44	27
Each time the Farm Bill is renewed I worry about how changes will affect my operation	3	9	18	52	18
Commodity programs have been good for most Iowa farmers	4	11	30	53	4
Commodity programs have been an important safety net for my farm operation	6	14	25	45	10
Commodity programs favor agribusiness companies over farmers.....	2	12	40	33	13
Ethanol policy should focus more on developing cellulosic and other non-grain forms of biofuels.	4	15	44	29	8

Table 7. Farm policy and commodity production, part 2

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
Profit margins on corn and soybeans get eaten up by land rents and input costs faster than they used to	1	4	10	48	38
Increased specialization in commodities (corn, soybeans, hogs, etc.) has led to loss of farms	2	8	19	42	30
If there were no commodity programs, I would still produce the same mix of crops/livestock	1	6	24	60	10
Sometimes I feel like I have little control over the profitability of my farm	3	16	13	54	14
Too much reliance on corn and soybeans contributes to financial risk for row crop farmers.....	1	14	30	48	7
To make a living producing corn and soybeans, farmers have to continually increase acreage	4	22	24	41	9
The shift to corn and soybeans as the dominant crops has led to a decline in markets for other crops.....	4	26	36	29	6
If there were no commodity programs, Iowa farmers would grow more fruits, nuts, vegetables, and other non-program crops.....	6	31	45	15	3
The shift away from diversified farm operations and toward specialized grain or livestock operations has generally been good for <i>Iowa's farmers</i>	16	32	34	18	1
The shift away from diversified farm operations and toward specialized grain or livestock operations has generally been good for <i>Iowa's rural communities</i>	19	36	30	12	2

ers, and 50 percent agreed that farmers have to continually increase acreage in order to make a living farming corn and soybeans.

Two statements focused on the long-term impacts that specialization trends have had on Iowa's farmers and rural communities. The first asked participants to rate their agreement or disagreement with the statement "The shift away from diversified farm operations and toward specialized grain or livestock operations has generally been good for Iowa's farmers." Only 19 percent of farmers agreed with that position, and 48 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed (table 7). In response to an identical statement regarding rural communities, even fewer farmers agreed (14 percent) and many more disagreed (55 percent) that a greater reliance on specialized commodity production has been good for rural communities.

Finally, several items centered on markets and cropping decisions. The argument is often heard that commodity programs discourage farmers from diversifying into non-traditional crops. However, 70 percent of farmers agreed that they would plant the same mix of crops and livestock even if there were no commodity support programs in place. Thirty-five percent agreed that the shift to corn and soybeans as the dominant crops has reduced market opportunities for other crops. Only 18 percent agreed that in the absence of commodity programs, Iowa farmers would grow more fruits, nuts, vegetables, and other non-program crops.

Mixed Livestock and Grain Farming

Over the last several decades, Iowa farmers have increasingly shifted from mixed grain and livestock operations to specialized grain

production. In 1989, 64 percent of Farm Poll participants raised both grain and livestock, 31 percent specialized in crop production only, and three percent produced only livestock. By 2009, the percentage of farmers with mixed crop and livestock farming systems had dropped to 42 percent, with 50 percent producing only row crops and slightly over one percent specializing in livestock. The 2009 Farm Poll investigated potential reasons behind this long-term shift away from mixed systems and toward specialized operations.

Several items received near unanimous endorsement as factors related to the decline in mixed grain and livestock farming. At the top of the list, with 92 percent agreement, was the statement “As farmers age, working with livestock becomes more difficult” (table 8). A second item related to the work involved in production

processes, “Livestock production requires more labor than grain production,” drew 91 percent agreement among participants. The average age of Iowa farmers has risen steadily over the last decades and continues to rise, so these responses both make sense and merit attention.

Other factors, including displacement by grain farming, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and recreation, also loomed large in farmers’ assessments of the decline in mixed grain and livestock production systems. Ninety-one percent of farmers agreed that “increased grain production has displaced pasture and hay acreage” (table 8). Recent changes in land rental rates were also implicated, with 84 percent agreeing that higher rents have led to reductions in acreage available for grazing and haying. Sixty-four percent of participants agreed that the CRP has displaced pasture and

Table 8. Reasons for the decline in mixed livestock and grain farming

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
—Percentage—					
As farmers age, working with livestock becomes more difficult.....	0	2	5	66	26
Increased grain production has displaced pasture and hay acreage.....	0	2	6	62	29
Livestock production requires more labor than grain production	1	3	6	62	29
The increase in land rental rates has reduced available pasture for grazing	0	3	12	57	27
Mixed livestock and grain farms can better manage risk than farms that rely only upon grain or livestock.....	1	6	16	64	14
Commodity programs favor grain production over livestock or mixed grain-livestock systems.....	1	6	21	55	18
The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has displaced pasture and hay acreage.....	1	11	25	51	13
The profitability of livestock production has declined relative to grain production.....	0	11	29	51	8
Conversion of pasture land to recreational/hunting land has reduced available pasture for grazing	2	13	35	37	14
Costs of production systems (machinery and equipment, facilities, etc.) are so high that farmers have to choose between grain and livestock	2	21	38	33	6

hay acreage, and 51 percent agreed that conversion of farms to recreational and hunting land has led to a decline in land available for pasture and hay.

Substantial percentages of participants indicated that policy and market effects have also played a role in the decline of mixed systems. While 78 percent of participants agreed that mixed livestock and grain farms can better manage risk than specialized operations, 73 percent believed that commodity programs favor grain production over livestock or mixed grain-livestock systems, and 59 percent agreed that the profitability of livestock production has declined relative to grain production (table 8). Thirty-nine percent agreed that the costs of production systems are so high that producers have to choose between grain and livestock systems.

Farming and Food Systems in Rural Communities

Adequate access to supermarkets or other sources of fresh, wholesome foods has become a concern in some rural areas over the last decades. At the same time, development of local food systems has come to be seen as a strategy that can address both food accessibility and rural economic development needs.

Access to food and self-reliance

Farmers were asked two questions relating to food accessibility: how far they have to travel one-way to reach a supermarket, and what percentage of the food consumed in their households is produced on their land. On average, farmers reported that they travel 10.7 miles to the nearest supermarket, for a round-trip of about 21 miles. About 25 percent of farm families live less than five miles from a supermarket, while another quarter live more than 15 miles away.

Levels of food produced on the farm for household consumption were generally low. Farmers indicated that on average about 11 percent of the foods consumed in their households was

produced on their farms. Around 40 percent of farms produced less than five percent of the food that the household used, and another 20 percent produced between six and 10 percent of what their households consumed. Only about five percent of participants reported that their farms met more than 50 percent of household food consumption needs.

Local food

The last several years have seen an increased focus on the development of local food systems as a strategy to promote economic growth, improve nutrition, and strive for better environmental outcomes. Over three-quarters of participants agreed or strongly agreed that people are increasingly interested in locally grown food (table 9). Forty-seven percent agreed that Iowa imports too much food from other states and foreign countries. Strong majorities supported efforts to develop local food systems, with over 60 percent of farmers in agreement that the local food movement could provide important new market opportunities for Iowa farmers and 70 percent agreeing that the state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell products in Iowa grocery stores and restaurants.

Several of the questions asked in this year's Farm Poll were also asked in the 1999 Farm Poll, and the comparisons allow us to chart trends in beliefs about local food systems over the last decade. In 1999, 51 percent of farmers agreed with the statement "Most people don't care where their food is produced" compared to only 36 percent in 2009 (table 9). Another question that was posed in both years asked farmers whether the state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell products to institutions such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons. Sixty-three percent agreed in 2009, up from 45 percent in 1999. Statements about developing strategies that help Iowa farmers to access local and regional markets for fruits and vegetables were presented in both years. In 2009, 60 percent of farmers agreed that such initiatives should be pursued,

Table 9. Local food

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
—Percentage—						
People are increasingly interested in locally grown foods		1	5	19	67	9
The state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell farm products to Iowa grocery stores and restaurants.....		1	6	23	60	10
The state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell farm products to institutions such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons*	1999	3	15	37	36	9
	2009	1	6	29	55	8
The local food movement could provide important new market opportunities for Iowa farmers		1	4	32	55	8
Farmers' markets have much to offer as an alternative for farmers to increase their incomes	1999	3	21	43	30	3
	2009	1	9	29	54	7
Processing plants for alternative products such as fruits, vegetables, and specialty meats should be developed to help Iowa farmers serve local and regional markets*	1999	1	7	49	37	6
	2009	1	4	36	53	7
Iowa imports too much food from other states and foreign countries		2	11	41	34	13
Most people don't care where their food is produced	1999	5	25	19	40	11
	2009	8	37	18	31	5

* These statements were worded slightly differently in 1999; however the meanings are substantially the same.

compared to 43 percent in 1999. Finally, the statement “Farmers’ markets have much to offer as an alternative for farmers to increase their incomes” garnered agreement among 61 percent of farmers in 2009, nearly double the 33 percent that agreed with the same statement in 1999. Taken together, these results indicate that Iowa farmers are increasingly supportive of and interested in participating in local food systems.

Value-Added Agriculture

Value-added agriculture is also viewed as a means toward economic development in rural areas. Defined as the processing or marketing of an agricultural product in a way that allows producers to earn a greater portion of their products’ commercial value, value-added agriculture encompasses a broad range of activities

that can allow farmers to turn innovative ideas and management expertise into higher returns from their farm operations. The Farm Poll explored current involvement in value-added agricultural activities and barriers to participation in such initiatives.

Nine percent of Farm Poll respondents reported that they were involved in a value-added agriculture business. Among those who indicated that they were participating in a value-added enterprise, 41 percent were involved in either ethanol or biodiesel production. Following in frequency, at 30 percent, were meat-related ventures, primarily the direct marketing of beef, pork, or other meats. Production of organic, specialty, or identity-preserved grains was cited by 18 percent of value-added entrepreneurs, and seven percent produced and marketed

fruits or vegetables. Other value-added activities included production of cheese, honey, and ornamental plants.

To develop a better understanding of why so few Iowa farmers participate in value-added agriculture ventures, we worked with the Iowa State University Value Added Agriculture Program to develop questions regarding challenges to farmer involvement in value-added initiatives and potential barriers to expansion beyond traditional agricultural production activities.

Perceived risk appears to be a major impediment to participation in value-added agricultural enterprises. Seventy percent of participants agreed that many farmers would rather take an off-farm job rather than start a value-added enterprise, and 67 percent agreed that many farmers just don't want to start something new (table 10). Sixty-six percent of

participants reported that markets for products other than unprocessed major commodities are limited in their area, and 62 percent agreed that demand for alternative agricultural products is uncertain. The high rates of agreement on these four items likely reflect an aversion to risk. Starting a new business can involve much more financial risk than taking an off-farm job with an established employer. Especially in cases where markets for products may not be well-developed or accessible, such considerations may play an important role in reluctance to get involved in a new, untested venture.

Lack of business experience and marketing skills also seem to act as barriers to the development of value-added agricultural activities. Sixty percent of participants agreed that many farmers would feel uncomfortable trying to market products directly to customers

Table 10. Value-added agricultural businesses

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
Many farmers would rather take an off-farm job than start a value-added enterprise	0	5	25	63	7
Many farmers just don't want to start something new .	1	9	23	62	5
Markets for products other than unprocessed major commodities are limited in my area	0	7	27	58	8
Demand for alternative agricultural products is uncertain.....	0	7	32	57	5
Many farmers would feel uncomfortable trying to market agricultural products directly to customers	0	10	30	56	4
Many farmers don't have sufficient business development experience to start a value-added business	1	11	30	52	6
Start-up costs for value-added businesses are too high for most farmers.....	0	7	41	47	5
Farmers are not aware of opportunities to start value-added businesses	1	9	40	47	3
Farmers are too busy with their farm operations to get involved in value-added businesses	0	13	36	45	6
By providing a safety net for farmers, commodity programs discourage participation in value-added businesses.....	0	13	47	36	4
Banks are reluctant to provide financing for non-traditional agricultural businesses	0	7	62	27	4

(table 10). Fifty-eight percent concurred that many farmers do not have sufficient business development experience, and 50 percent agreed that farmers are just not aware of opportunities to start value-added businesses.

Targeted Conservation

Targeted conservation refers to soil and water conservation activities that use techniques such as satellite imagery and geographic information systems (GIS) to identify the areas of the landscape that are most vulnerable to soil erosion or water quality impairment. Because targeted conservation approaches focus resources on the areas of the landscape that are most in need of conservation practices and would provide the most environmental benefits, they are seen by many as a way to improve the effectiveness of soil and water conservation activities. Despite their potential to address the most pressing agricultural conservation needs, targeted approaches have not been widely implemented.

The Farm Poll examined how farmers feel about targeted conservation strategies.

Overall, farmers appear to be supportive of targeted approaches. About three-fourths of Farm Poll participants agreed that conservation funding should be higher for land that is most vulnerable to soil and water quality problems (table 11). Seventy-four percent agreed that targeted conservation is a good idea because limited resources should be spent where they have the most impact, and 71 percent agreed that satellite imagery, GIS, and similar technologies can be valuable tools to help farmers improve the environmental performance of their farm operations.

Three questions focused on the balance between concerns about privacy and property rights and the need to address natural resource problems. Responses to the statement “Government use of satellite imagery and GIS to map characteristics of private land is an invasion of privacy” were fairly evenly split, with 30 per-

Table 11. Targeted conservation

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	— Percentage —				
Conservation funding should be higher for land that is most vulnerable to soil and water quality problems	1	5	19	65	11
Targeted conservation is a good idea because limited resources should be spent where they have the most impact.....	1	4	22	64	10
Satellite imagery, GIS and other technologies can be valuable tools to help farmers improve their farm’s environmental performance.....	1	3	25	64	7
If a conservation professional contacted me about a potential natural resource concern on my land, I would allow them to come to assess it	1	4	25	60	10
Targeted conservation programs are needed because current programs are not effective enough...	2	13	51	31	3
Government use of satellite imagery and GIS to map characteristics of private land is an invasion of privacy.....	4	34	33	24	6
If a conservation professional contacted me about a potential natural resource concern on my land, I would feel unfairly singled out.....	6	45	36	11	2

cent in agreement, 33 percent uncertain, and 38 percent in disagreement. Farmers were also asked whether they would feel unfairly singled out if a conservation professional contacted them about a potential natural resource concern on their land: only 13 percent agreed, compared to 51 percent who either disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that in general they would *not* feel singled out. Finally, farmers were presented with the statement “If a conservation professional contacted me about a potential natural resource concern on my land, I would allow them to come to assess it.” A solid majority—70 percent—agreed that they would allow it, and only five percent disagreed. Together, these results indicate that most farmers would support a shift toward a more targeted approach to promoting conservation activities on agricultural land.

Nutrient Removal Wetlands

Restoration or creation of wetlands at strategic points on the landscape can reduce the amount of nutrients, chemicals, and sediment that enter streams from farmland. The survey provided participants with the following text: “The establishment or restoration of wetlands at key places on the landscape has been shown to be an effective tool for reducing the amount of agriculture-related nitrogen and sediment that reaches streams through run-off or tile discharge. In general, such wetlands are constructed at the end of drainage districts and

other drainage areas (watersheds) to capture nutrients and sediments before they enter streams and lakes.” They were then asked to respond to questions and statements about nutrient removal wetlands.

Several questions examined farmers’ familiarity with nutrient removal wetlands and willingness to consider establishing wetlands on their farmland. Fifty-eight percent of participants were familiar with constructed wetlands, 21 percent had visited one, and 13 percent reported that they had constructed wetlands on their own farmland (table 12). Thirty-nine percent indicated that they were aware of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), a federal program that helps landowners to establish nutrient removal wetlands where appropriate.

For the second set of questions, which was developed in consultation with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship staff, participants were provided with the following information about nutrient removal wetlands and the CREP program: “Nutrient removal wetlands cover 43 acres on average. Under the Iowa Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), landowners: 1) receive 100 percent cost-share of wetland and buffer establishment cost, 2) receive up to 15 annual rental payments of 150 percent of the weighted average soil rental rates, plus \$2 per acre maintenance payments, and 3) can choose to receive a one-time up-front incentive payment to enter

Table 12. Nutrient removal wetlands

	No	Uncertain	Yes
	— Percentage —		
Are you familiar with constructed wetlands for nutrient run-off reduction?	30	12	58
Are you familiar with the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)?	47	14	39
Is any of your farmland located at or near the bottom of a drainage district or other drainage area/watershed?	61	10	29
Have you ever visited a nutrient removal wetland or other constructed wetland?	76	3	21
Have you constructed wetlands on your farmland?	85	2	13

into a 30-year or permanent easement on the land. During the easement period, the land cannot be farmed, but landowners still receive 15 years of payments and still own and maintain control over the land. Enrollment in CREP does not make the land under easement public property.”

Participants were then asked to answer questions about their willingness to learn more or consider establishing a wetland themselves. The questions were preceded by the statement “If a portion of your farmland were identified as a critical site for a nutrient removal wetland, would you...?” Seventy-one percent responded that they would be willing to learn more about nutrient removal wetlands, and 58 percent expressed that they would be more likely to consider establishing a wetland on marginal cropland (table 13).

Forty-six percent indicated that they would consider establishing a nutrient removal wetland through the CREP program. A smaller, but still substantial percentage of farmers (29 percent) were willing to consider establishing a wetland with a permanent easement for \$2,500 an acre, and 23 percent would consider the 30-year easement option for \$1,000 an acre. When asked whether they would feel unfairly targeted if some of their land were identified

as a critical site for a wetland, only 15 percent indicated that they would, and only seven percent stated that they would refuse to consider the possibility of constructing a wetland under those circumstances.

Finally, six questions examined beliefs about water quality and the potential impacts of nutrient removal wetlands. Seventy-eight percent of farmers agreed that Iowa farmers should do more to reduce flows of nutrients and sediment into waterways and lakes, and 58 percent believed that nutrients from Iowa farms contribute to hypoxia (oxygen depletion) and sedimentation in Iowa lakes and rivers (table 14). Forty-five percent of participants endorsed nutrient removal wetlands as a good idea that should be promoted more heavily. In terms of impacts, while 64 percent of farmers believed that constructed wetlands would attract desirable wildlife for hunting and viewing, 32 percent agreed that such wetlands could cause upstream and downstream drainage problems for other landowners, and 27 percent felt that they could attract undesirable wildlife.

Personal and Financial Well-Being

Farming can be a stressful occupation. Much is outside of the farmer’s control, from the vagaries of weather, to market ups and downs.

Table 13. Nutrient removal wetlands, part 1

	No	Uncertain	Yes
If a portion of your farmland were identified as a critical site for a nutrient removal wetland, would you...	—Percentage—		
be willing to learn more about nutrient removal wetlands?.....	11	18	71
be more likely to consider establishing a wetland on marginal cropland?	14	27	58
consider establishing a nutrient removal wetland through the CREP program?	20	35	46
consider establishing a wetland with a permanent easement for \$2,500/acre?.....	30	40	29
consider establishing a wetland with a 30-year easement for \$1,000/acre?.....	39	38	23
feel unfairly targeted just because your land is located where it is?	56	28	15
refuse to consider the possibility of constructing a nutrient removal wetland?.....	61	32	7

Table 14. Nutrient removal wetlands, part 2

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
Iowa farmers should do more to reduce nutrient and sediment run-off into streams and lakes.....	0	3	19	65	13
Nutrient removal wetlands would attract desirable wildlife for hunting and viewing	1	5	30	57	7
Nutrients from Iowa farms contribute to hypoxia and sedimentation of Iowa lakes and rivers	1	6	36	49	9
Nutrient removal wetlands are a good idea that should be promoted more heavily among Iowa farmers	1	6	47	40	5
Nutrient removal wetlands could disrupt drainage systems for upstream/downstream landowners	2	14	52	29	3
Nutrient removal wetlands would attract undesirable wildlife	3	22	47	24	3

Every five years, the Farm Poll asks farmers a number of questions about stress: their personal levels of stress, stress among family members, and stress levels among farmers in their communities.

Farmers were asked to rate their current levels of personal stress on a scale of one to five, with one being “no stress” and five representing “very high” stress. Results suggest that farmers on the whole were experiencing low levels of stress at the outset of 2009. Fifty-seven percent rated their stress levels as low, 11 percent as very low, and two percent indicated that they had no stress at all. Twenty-seven percent reported high levels of personal stress, and three percent rated their level of stress as very high.

A second set of questions asked farmers to rate changes in stress levels—for them, for their families, and for other farmers in their communities—over the last five years. Thirty-seven percent of farmers reported that overall, their personal level of stress had increased in the last five years, compared to 22 percent reporting a decrease, and 42 percent reporting no change (table 15). Twenty-seven percent indicated that their concern about their level of stress had increased, compared to 17 percent reporting a decrease in concern and 56 percent no change. Regarding day-to-day stress levels, 28 percent of farmers cited an increase, 19 percent a decrease, and 54 percent reported no change. In terms of stress among their family members, 34 percent of farmers expressed that stress levels had risen,

Table 15. Stress

	Greatly or somewhat decreased	Remained the same	Greatly or somewhat increased
	—Percentage—		
Over the past five years...			
Have stress levels among farmers in your community.....	8	39	53
Has your personal level of stress	22	42	37
The level of stress in my family has.....	16	50	34
On a day-to-day basis, has your stress.....	19	54	28
Has your concern with your level of stress	17	56	27

16 percent reported declines, and 50 percent cited no change. Fifty-three percent responded that stress levels among farmers in their communities had increased, eight percent noted decreases, and 39 percent reported no change.

Finally, participants were asked to compare their financial situation to what it had been at the same time the year before, and to rate their overall satisfaction with their lives. In response to the question “How would you describe your financial situation today compared to this time last year?” slightly over a quarter of farmers expressed that they were somewhat better off (22 percent) or much better off (five percent).

Over one-third reported declines: 29 percent replied that they were worse off, and seven percent were much worse off. Thirty-eight percent indicated that their situation was unchanged.

Responses to the question “How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered?” were mostly positive. Fifty-eight percent of participants expressed that they were satisfied and 16 percent were very satisfied. Nineteen percent marked the neutral category and only six percent reported that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied their lives.

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