



2014 Summary Report

Introduction

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey of Iowa farmers. The survey project collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to agricultural stakeholders across Iowa and the Midwest. The Farm Poll has been conducted every year since its establishment in 1982. It is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship–Agriculture Statistics are partners in the Farm Poll. The information gathered through the annual survey 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 farm families who responded to this year’s survey and appreciate their continued participation.

Who Participates?

The 2014 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in February 2014 to a statewide panel of 2,218 farmers. Usable surveys were received from 1,128 farmers, resulting in a response rate of

51 percent. On average, Farm Poll participants were 65 years old. Because the Farm Poll is a panel survey, in which the same farmers participate in multiple years, participants are somewhat older on average than the general population of Iowa farmers. The average age of Iowa farmers is 57. Farm Poll participants’ farms were also somewhat larger on average than Iowa farms as a whole. Participants’ farms averaged 424 acres, compared to the U.S. Department of Agriculture–National Agricultural Statistics Service’s 2012 Census of Agriculture average of 346 acres.

Survey respondents reported a diversity of farming systems. Thirty-nine percent of the farmers surveyed reported that they planted only corn and/or soybeans in 2013. Twenty-one percent reported mixed row crop and livestock operations. Two percent reported that they only raised livestock, four percent had only Conservation Reserve Program land, and three percent had only hay or pasture. Fourteen percent reported both corn and/or soybeans and hay or pasture, and small percentages (two percent or less each) reported other combinations of crops and hay or grain and alternative crops such as small grains or vegetables.

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This year's Farm Poll focused on a range of issues that are important to Iowa's agricultural communities and all Iowans. Topics presented in this summary report include farm succession plans, the role that professional advisers play in decision making, use of information and communications technology, and quality of life.

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The Next Generation of Farmers

The average age of farmers has increased steadily over the last several decades. According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, farmers who are age 65 and over made up nearly 30 percent of Iowa farmers. By contrast, just 18 percent of the state's farmers were under 45 years of age. With nearly 60 percent of Iowa farmers over the age of 55, discussion of farm succession is common. The 2014 Farm Poll survey sought to answer a number of common

questions about farm succession, such as: "when will farmers retire (if ever), and what will happen to their farm operations?; who will be the successor, if they have identified one?; and, why do many farmers keep farming long after the typical retirement age of 65–67?" The questions were developed in collaboration with staff from ISU's Beginning Farmer Center.

Family farming background

The first question asked farmers to estimate how long both they and their families had farmed in the United States. On average, participants' families had farmed for 100 years (table 1), which translates into approximately four generations. Survey participants reported that they had farmed for an average of 39 years.

A second question asked farmers whether they had adult children who farm. Overall, 31 percent reported that they had at least one adult child who was currently farming (table 2). As would be expected, older farmers were more likely to report children who farm than younger farmers. About 43 percent of farmers over age 70 reported at least one child who farms, compared to 19 percent of farmers between the ages of 41 and 50.

Table 1. Years farming

	Average number of years
For about how many years has your family farmed (in the USA)?	100
For about how many years have you farmed (in the USA)?	39

Table 2. Number of adult children who currently farm

	All farmers	Farmers age 41–50	Farmers age 51–60	Farmers age 61–70	Farmers over age 70
	— Percent —				
None	68.6	80.8	71.8	73.3	56.8
One.....	22.0	11.5	18.0	20.3	30.5
Two	7.1	3.8	7.7	4.8	10.0
More than two.....	2.5	3.8	2.6	1.7	2.7

Table 3. Retirement plans

	— Percent —
I plan to retire in the next 5 years	14.2
I plan to retire in 6 to 10 years	14.2
I plan to retire in 11 to 15 years	8.6
I plan to retire in more than 15 years.....	6.8
I expect that I will never retire from farming (you will maintain full managerial control and provide some labor to a farm)	15.4
I expect that I will semi-retire from farming (you will provide some managerial control and/or labor to a farm)	20.4
I am semi-retired from farming (you provide some managerial control and/or labor to a farm)	15.2
I am retired from farming (you provide neither managerial control nor labor to a farm)	5.1

Retirement plans

Farmers were asked to share their plans for retirement. The survey provided eight categories and asked participants to select the one that best applied to them. The most frequent response, at 20 percent, was, “I expect that I will semi-retire from farming” (table 3). Fifteen percent of farmers indicated that they expected that they would never retire. An additional 15 percent selected the “already semi-retired” category. Fourteen percent planned to retire within five years, and 14 percent planned to retire in 6–10 years.

Succession plans

The survey posed the question, “have you identified a potential successor that you expect will eventually manage your farm operation?” Forty-nine percent of farmers indicated that they had identified a successor (table 4). Analysis by time to retirement shows farmers

in the largest “retirement” category—those who expected to semi-retire but still provide some managerial and/or labor input to the farm operation—had the highest rate of successor identification, at 57 percent. Fifty-five percent of farmers who indicated that they would retire in the next five years had identified a successor. Fewer than half of the farmers in the remaining retirement categories had identified a successor.

Among farmers who had identified a successor, children, including sons or daughters-in-law, were most commonly named as successors (table 5). Twelve percent of respondents indicated that their successor would be a relative, and 14 percent reported that a non-related person would take over the operation. On average, the successor was 37 years old.

Distribution of decision making

Passing the farm on to a successor also implies passing on decision-making responsibility.

Table 4. Percent of farmers who have identified a successor, by time to retirement

	— Percent —
All farmers.....	49.1
Plan to retire in next five years.....	55.4
Plan to retire in 6–10 years.....	39.5
Plan to retire in 11–15 years	42.1
Plan to retire in more than 15 years.....	45.3
Expect will semi-retire.....	56.9

Table 5. Who will be the successor?

	— Percent —
One of my children (including sons/daughters-in-law)	73.9
A relative (nephew/niece, brother/sister).....	12.1
A non-related person	14.0

Table 6. Decision-making distribution between the farmer and successor, farmers who plan to retire in the next five years or who are semi-retired.

	Me alone	Primarily me, with successor input	Equally me and the successor	Primarily the successor, with my input	Successor alone	Not applicable
	— Percent —					
Decide the timing of operations.....	22.8	17.4	15.6	20.4	19.2	4.8
Decide the level of inputs to use	22.2	19.2	18.0	19.2	16.2	5.4
Decide type and make of machinery and equipment to purchase.....	26.2	14.3	15.5	12.5	25.0	6.5
Decide the mix and type of enterprises in the long run.....	24.3	16.6	21.9	15.4	14.8	7.1
Make annual crop/livestock plans ...	23.2	17.9	17.9	15.5	13.1	12.5
Negotiate sales of crops/livestock...	29.1	12.1	17.6	10.9	17.6	12.7
Decide when to sell crops/livestock	28.7	14.4	18.0	12.0	15.0	12.0
Keep farm records	41.8	10.6	17.1	10.0	17.1	3.5
Decide when to pay bills.....	39.9	11.9	19.0	6.0	19.0	4.2
Plan day-to-day work.....	32.5	25.3	12.0	14.5	13.3	2.4

However, ceding the reigns of a farm operation can be a difficult step. The Farm Poll survey asked farmers who had identified a successor to indicate how decision making was currently shared between them and the successor.

Table 6 presents the distribution of decision-making responsibility for a number of common decisions. The analysis presented in table 6 focuses solely on those farmers who indicated that they had identified a successor and who either planned to retire within five years or who considered themselves to be semi-retired. The results indicate that most successors share at least equally in many decisions. For

example, 55 percent of farmers reported that the responsibility for decisions regarding the timing of operations was divided equally, was primarily the successor's, or was solely the successor's domain. On the other end of the spectrum, they tended to maintain control of farm record-keeping, with 53 percent reporting that they were either solely responsible (42 percent) or primarily responsible (11 percent) for that task.

Plans among farmers with no successor identified

The Farm Poll survey asked the 51 percent of farmers who reported that they had not

Table 7. Plans for the farm operation, if no successor identified*

	All farmers without successors	Retire in 5 years	Retire in 6–10 years	Retire in 11–15 years
— Percent —				
Will rent out land	35.4	52.9	45.3	36.4
Do not know	29.1	18.6	28.4	30.9
Hope to identify a successor someday	20.3	8.6	16.8	25.5
Will sell land.....	14.8	17.1	11.6	9.1
Other	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0

*Percentages do not add up to 100 because question was “check all that apply.”

identified a successor what would happen to their farm operation when they no longer manage it. Overall, 35 percent of farmers without successors indicated that they would rent out land, 29 percent did not know what would happen to the operation, and 15 percent reported that they would sell land (table 7). About 20 percent hoped that they would identify a successor someday. Comparisons by predicted years to retirement shows that higher percentages of farmers whose retirement time was closer indicated that they would rent or sell land than those who were further away from retirement. Similarly, farmers who were further

from retirement were more likely to report that they still hoped to find a successor, or were not sure what would happen to the operation.

Opinions about delayed retirement

Nearly one-third of Iowa farmers are over the traditional retirement age of 65. There are many possible reasons that farmers might retire later than age 65. The survey listed a number of commonly stated reasons and asked respondents to rate the importance of each.

The top-rated reason was that “farming is such an important part of [a farmer’s] identity that retirement is very difficult” (table 8). The

Table 8. Reasons that many farmers delay retirement

	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
— Percent —				
For many farmers, farming is such an important part of their identity that retirement is very difficult.....	2.8	13.5	48.6	35.1
Modern equipment allows them to farm longer.....	3.7	13.8	50.1	32.4
They maintain better health for longer.....	4.8	19.9	58.3	17.0
Many farmers just love farming too much to stop	3.9	21.1	47.2	27.8
Many farmers don’t know what else they would do with their time	5.6	21.3	47.5	25.7
They have a difficult time giving up control of the farm operation	3.9	23.1	45.2	27.7
They relate retirement to their own mortality	9.2	27.1	45.0	18.7
Many farmers don’t have a successor to take over	11.3	30.7	40.9	17.1
Young people are not interested in farming.....	26.3	34.7	28.6	10.4
They can’t afford to retire	25.9	35.1	26.8	12.1

second-highest rated reason was that modern equipment allows farmers to farm longer than they used to. Other reasons that were rated as important or very important by more than 70 percent of participants were that farmers stay healthier longer (75 percent); they love farming too much to stop (75 percent); they don't know what else they would do with themselves (73 percent); and, they do not want to relinquish control of the operation (73 percent). The two lowest-rated reasons, both at 39 percent important or very important, were that young people are not interested in farming, and that farmers cannot afford to retire.

Professional Advisers and Decision Making

Farming has become increasingly complex, and farmers must consider many factors as they weigh decisions about planting and fertilizing, pest and disease management, soil and water conservation, and other types of decisions. To gather information and advice to help them make decisions, farmers rely on various kinds of professional advisers. The 2012 Farm Poll summary showed that many farmers turn to professional advisers such as agricultural retailers, extension specialists, and crop consultants for information on crop production, pest management, and similar topics (<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Iowa-Farm-and-Rural-Life-Poll-2012-Summary-Report>). The 2014 Farm Poll sought to complement those findings by documenting the degree to which farmers rely on professional advisers to help them make agricultural management decisions.

Farmers were provided with introductory text that explained the question and provided instructions. The introductory text was:

As agriculture becomes more technology-intensive, many farmers turn to professional advisers such as agricultural

product sales representatives, independent crop advisers, extension agronomists, etc., for advice and information to help them make decisions about what inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides), practices, equipment, etc., to use.

Below is a list of management decisions and actions that are made on many farms. For each of the decisions, please circle the category that best describes how decision making and/or responsibility for action is distributed between you and professional adviser(s).

This was followed by a list of 18 specific types of decisions under five general decision areas: crop management, insect pest management, weed management, crop disease management, and soil and water conservation practices. The list was developed with assistance from extension agronomists. The survey asked farmers to select one of five categories characterizing the distribution of decision-making responsibility ranging from not using an adviser to the adviser alone being responsible for the decisions (table 9).

Planting and fertilizer decisions

Five decisions related to planting and fertilizer use were included. Most farmers did not use an adviser to inform decisions regarding tillage type (71 percent) and tillage timing (75 percent) (table 9). On the other hand, most farmers reported that they consult with professional advisers to some degree for seed selection decisions (75 percent), planting decisions such as seeding rate (64 percent), and fertilizer program development (75 percent).

Insect pest management

Four decisions related to management of insect pests were included in the survey. Relatively few farmers indicated that they make pest management decisions on their own (table 9). More than three-quarters of farmers indicated that they use a professional adviser

Table 9. Distribution of decision-making responsibility between farmers and professional advisers*

	I do not use an adviser	Primarily me, with adviser input	Equally me and an adviser	Primarily an adviser, with my input	Adviser alone
— Percent —					
Planting and fertilizing					
Tillage type.....	70.7	22.7	4.2	1.5	0.9
Tillage timing	74.7	18.7	4.3	1.4	0.9
Seed selection.....	25.3	35.9	20.5	15.3	2.9
Planting decisions (e.g., seeding rate)	36.5	37.2	15.5	8.8	2.0
Fertilizer program development.....	25.3	36.5	22.7	13.1	2.3
Insect pest management					
Scouting and identification of insects.....	21.7	27.8	18.5	24.2	7.8
Whether or not to spray	23.2	30.1	21.5	20.2	5.0
Which insecticide to use.....	16.7	26.9	21.3	25.6	9.5
Which insect-resistant variety to use (e.g., Bt corn).....	17.8	28.9	24.0	22.3	7.0
Weed management					
Scouting and identification of weeds	24.4	30.3	18.0	21.3	6.0
Whether or not to spray	24.9	30.7	20.5	19.0	4.9
Which herbicide to use.....	16.4	29.8	23.2	22.7	7.9
Crop disease management					
Scouting and identification of diseases.....	19.0	25.1	19.3	26.8	9.8
Whether or not to spray	19.5	26.7	22.7	23.9	7.2
Which fungicide to use.....	15.3	25.3	21.8	25.8	11.7
Soil and water conservation practices					
Identification of conservation practices needed.....	33.3	32.1	19.3	12.3	3.0
Deciding whether or not to implement conservation practices	34.5	33.1	17.9	11.8	2.6
Planning and design of conservation practices	26.8	26.1	21.0	21.2	5.0

*Statistics presented only for farmers who indicated that the decision type applied to them.

to some degree for decisions on scouting and identification of insects (78 percent), whether or not to spray (77 percent), which insecticide to use (83 percent), and which insect-resistant seed varieties to use (82 percent).

Weed management

Three decisions related to weed management were included in the survey. As with insect management, relatively few farmers indicated that they make weed management decisions

on their own (table 9). More than three-quarters of farmers indicated that they use a professional adviser to some degree for decisions on scouting and identification of weeds (76 percent), whether or not to spray (75 percent), and which herbicide to use (84 percent).

Crop disease management

Three crop disease management decisions were included in the survey. Again, relatively

few farmers indicated that they make crop disease management decisions on their own (table 9). Eighty percent or more of farmers indicated that they use a professional adviser to some degree for decisions on scouting and identification of diseases (81 percent), whether or not to spray (81 percent), and which fungicide to use (85 percent).

Soil and water conservation practices

The final decision category was soil and water conservation practices. Slightly lower percentages of farmers indicated that they consult with professional advisers when making decisions in this area (table 9). Nevertheless, around two-thirds of farmers reported that they consult advisers for support in identifying conservation needs (67 percent), deciding whether or not to implement conservation practices (65 percent), and planning and design of conservation practices (73 percent).

Use of Information Technology

The Farm Poll periodically asks farmers about their use of various information technology

and communication devices. The most recent question set was in 2012 (for 2012 statistics, see <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Iowa-Farm-and-Rural-Life-Poll-2012-Summary-Report>). The 2014 Farm Poll updated those questions and added a new device category for tablet computers with a cellular data plan.

In 2014, 81 percent of farmers indicated that they use a basic cell phone (table 10), up modestly from 75 percent in 2012. A greater increase was seen in smartphone use, which rose from 11 percent in 2012 to 30 percent in 2014. Similarly, use of a tablet computer such as an iPad rose from 10 percent in 2012 to 27 percent in 2014. Use of a computer with high-speed Internet access rose from 58 percent in 2012 to 70 percent in 2014, while use of dial-up Internet access remained relatively stable. Comparisons of technology use by age group showed predictable patterns: younger farmers tended to use all technologies except basic cell phones at a higher rate than older farmers (table 10).

If farmers indicated that they used a given technology, they were then asked to estimate how often they used that technology to “access

Table 10. Use of common information technology devices*

	All farmers	Age 40 or under	Age 41–50	Age 51–60	Age 61–70	Over age 70
	— Percent —					
Basic cell phone.....	80.6	60.7	70.2	78.7	86.2	79.3
Smartphone (e.g., iPhone, Android)	29.8	64.3	50.9	38.9	28.5	15.9
Tablet computer (with or without cellular data)....	26.9	46.4	47.4	32.6	25.3	18.6
Tablet computer (e.g., iPad, Kindle) with a cellular data plan.....	18.9	21.4	26.8	22.2	19.0	14.6
Tablet computer (e.g., iPad, Kindle) without a cellular data plan	17.9	40.7	35.2	22.5	14.7	12.1
Computer with high-speed Internet access.....	69.6	96.3	87.5	80.5	72.2	51.1
Computer with dial-up Internet access.....	14.0	7.7	13.5	12.1	13.5	17.3

*Percentages overlap because people can have multiple technologies. For example, some respondents reported having both a basic cellphone and a smartphone, or both a tablet without a cellular data plan and a tablet with a data plan.

Table 11. Frequency of device use to access information for farm decision making, users only

	Never	Seldom	Often	Very often
	— Percent —			
Smartphone (e.g., iPhone, Android)	4.2	21.1	39.6	35.1
Computer with high-speed Internet access.....	5.3	20.3	43.9	30.5
Tablet computer (e.g., iPad, Kindle) with a cellular data plan.....	10.5	24.0	43.9	21.6
Computer with dial-up Internet access.....	8.6	29.5	49.5	12.4
Tablet computer (e.g., iPad, Kindle) without a cellular data plan.....	14.2	27.8	40.1	17.9

information to help [them] make decisions about farming.” Smartphones were most often used to access information to support farm decision making, with 75 percent of smartphone users indicating that they use them for that purpose often or very often (table 11). Among users of computers with high-speed Internet access, 74 percent used them for farm decision making either often or very often. The lowest frequency, at 58 percent often or very often, was for tablet computers without a cellular data plan. Thus, in general, if farmers indicated that they used a given technology at all, they also reported that they used it to help them make decisions about farming.

Quality of Life

Every two years since 1982, the Farm Poll has asked farmers to evaluate changes in quality

of life, defined as “the degree of satisfaction with all aspects of life,” for their families and families in their communities. Ninety-one percent of participants reported that quality of life for their families either stayed the same or improved over the five years leading up to February/March 2014 (table 12). This ties with the highest level ever reported in the 32-year history of the Farm Poll (2012). Eighty-five percent indicated that quality of life among families in their communities had either remained the same or improved; a new Farm Poll high.

Farmers were also optimistic about the future: 86 percent predicted that quality of life would stay the same or improve for their families over the next five years; 78 percent believed the same about families in their communities. There was a substantial drop, however, in

Table 12. Quality of life

	Become much worse	Become somewhat worse	Remain(ed) the same	Become somewhat better	Become much better
	— Percent —				
During the past five years, has the quality of life for families in your community	1.3	14.0	38.4	36.5	9.8
During the past five years, has the quality of life for your family.....	0.9	7.8	35.2	44.0	12.1
In the next five years, will the quality of life for families in your community	1.9	20.2	54.3	22.5	1.1
In the next five years, will the quality of life for your family	1.3	12.5	54.4	28.5	3.4
In the next five years, will the overall economic prospects for Iowa farmers	4.6	40.9	36.4	16.8	1.3

respondents' predictions for the overall economic prospects for farmers over the next five years: 55 percent predicted that overall economic prospects for Iowa farmers will remain steady or improve over the same time period, compared to 65 percent in 2012.

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