BUILDING A FUTURE WITH FARMERS II

NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION
EST 2010

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE NATIONAL YOUNG FARMER SURVEY

NOVEMBER 2017

BUILDING A FUTURE WITH FARMERS II: RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE NATIONAL YOUNG FARMER SURVEY

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Eva Moss, Heartstrong Farm, NC. Photo credit: Jaclyn Valadka

Stacia Cannon, Topp Fruit, CO. Photo credit: Eva Verbeeck

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our Purpose

The National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers and ranchers to ensure their success. We tackle the most critical structural and economic issues that prevent motivated young people from succeeding in farming and ranching. In January and February 2017, we conducted a National Young Farmer Survey to ensure our work is grounded in the needs of young farmers and to offer policymakers recommendations to address these needs ahead of the next farm bill.

In this report, we present responses from 3,517 past, current, and aspiring farmers under 40 years old across the U.S. and a policy platform to ensure that farmers today—and future generations tomorrow—can continue to grow food for our nation.

An Aging Farm Population

Farmers over the age of 65 now outnumber farmers under 35 by a margin of six to one, and U.S. farmland is overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of older farmers. Nearly two-thirds of farmland is currently managed by someone over 55.[1] The National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates that over the next five years—the lifespan of the next farm bill—nearly 100 million acres of U.S. farmland are expected to change ownership[2] and will need a new farmer.

Fortunately, many young Americans are stepping up and launching new farm businesses. For only the second time in the last century, the 2012 Census of Agriculture registered an increase over the previous census in the number of farmers under 35 years old.[3] These young farmers are entrepreneurial and tough, but they are finding that talent and hard work alone may not equate to farm success. There are many structural barriers standing in their way—and the stakes have never been higher.

Hope, Despite It All

Young farmers face serious obstacles to launching and growing their farm businesses: they can't afford farmland; student debt is compromising their ability to capitalize their businesses; adequate labor and support staff are difficult to recruit; and health insurance is unaffordable. Federal and state policies are underserving these needs, and many young farmers are not accessing the programs designed to help.

Our survey illustrated a challenging economic picture for young farmers. Sixty-one percent of individual respondents reported needing another job to make ends meet, and fewer than half own all the acres they're farming. Indicators tracked by USDA also suggest trends in the agricultural economy are hitting young farmers especially hard. According to Dr. Robert Johansson, USDA's Chief Economist, young farmers and those who rent more of their land tend to be far more in debt relative to their assets.[4] In 2015, farmers under 35 years old had an average debt-to-asset ratio of 28%, compared to 16% for those aged 45 to 54, and only 11.5% for those aged 55 to 64.[5]

Despite the challenges, young farmers are hopeful. The majority of young farmers said that they are making, or will eventually make, sufficient income in farming to meet their life goals.

Young Farmer Top Challenges

ACCESS TO LAND

Secure land tenure is a fundamental component of a viable farm business. Land access is the top challenge cited by current farmers, aspiring farmers, and those who have stopped farming. In this survey, 39% of respondents who are current farmers cited land access as a significant challenge, with 17% calling it the most significant challenge they face. Both first-generation and multigenerational farmers cited land access as their top challenge.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Among current farmers, 29% called their student loan debt a significant challenge, with 10% citing it as the most significant one. Farming is a capital-intensive and risky undertaking, and accessing credit for farming is already difficult. When saddled with thousands of dollars of student loan debt, many young farmers are denied loans to launch or grow their farm businesses.

LABOR

The shortfall of skilled farm labor is affecting young farmers as well as the general farm community. Thirty percent of respondents cited labor as a significant challenge, with 10% citing it as their biggest challenge.

HEALTH INSURANCE

Farming is a dangerous, physically strenuous occupation. For young farmers, many of whom are in the early years of starting and growing their farm business and their families, lack of affordable health insurance puts them, their families, and their businesses at significant risk. Nearly half of respondents cited health care as a significant challenge, and 8% said it was their most significant challenge.

Connie Surbur, the Golden Yoke, MT. Photo credit: Laura Ginsberg

Who Are the Nation's Young Farmers?

With the help of 94 partner organizations, NYFC surveyed 4,746 total respondents in January and February 2017. After limiting the sample to respondents under 40 years old living in the United States, our sample totaled 3,517 aspiring, current, and former farmers.[6]

WOMEN

60% of survey respondents were women.

NOT FROM FARM FAMILIES

75% of survey respondents did not grow up on a farm.

HIGHLY EDUCATED

69% of survey respondents had degrees beyond high school.

MORE LIKELY TO BE FARMERS OF COLOR OR INDIGENOUS FARMERS THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

The proportion of people of color and indigenous farmers in our survey was roughly twice that of the 2012 Census of Agriculture.[7]

GROWING VEGETABLES AND LIVESTOCK ON DIVERSIFIED FARMS

72% of survey respondents grew vegetables, and 81% of respondents said they grew two or more types of products. While just 25% said livestock made up the highest percentage of their sales, many more are using animals to diversify their farms.

SELLING DIRECTLY TO CONSUMERS

Community supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets were the marketing channels that made up the highest proportion of farm sales.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS

75% of farmers described their practices as "sustainable," and 63% described their practices as "organic," though many of them have not sought certification.

6. Our sample is not randomly selected nor statistically modeled to represent all young farmers in the U.S.

Key Findings

LAND ACCESS IS THE NUMBER ONE CHALLENGE YOUNG FARMERS FACE.

Whether they came from a farm family or were first-generation farmers, respondents cited land access—particularly finding and affording land on a farm income—as their top challenge. It is also the top reason why farmers quit farming and why aspiring farmers haven't yet started.

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT IS THE MOST HELPFUL PROGRAM.

The ACA was cited most often when we asked which program, policy, or institution was most helpful.

WHEN YOUNG FARMERS AREN'T USING FEDERAL PROGRAMS, IT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW ABOUT THEM.

The biggest factor preventing young farmers from using federal programs is lack of familiarity.

YOUNG FARMERS SURVEYED ARE HIGHLY EDUCATED.

Both first-generation and multigenerational farmers are more likely than average American adults to have a higher education degree.

SEVERE AND UNPREDICTABLE WEATHER IS COMMON, AND THE MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS ATTRIBUTE ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES TO CLIMATE CHANGE.

Sixty-six percent of young farmers have experienced unpredictable weather, more severe storms, increased pest pressure, increased uncertainty in water supply, and/or increased rate of disease.

Andrew Barsness, MN

How Lawmakers Can Help Young Farmers In The United States

① ADDRESS LAND ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

FEDERAL

Significantly increase funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and give top priority to easements that protect the affordability of farmland for farmers

Raise the loan limit for Farm Service Agency (FSA) Direct Farm Ownership Loans and increase funding for these loans

Incentivize farmland transition and leasing to young farmers through the tax code

Fully fund programs—such as the USDA Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers program, known as the 2501 Program—that provide support for organizations addressing inequalities in land access and transition

Improve the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) to increase program participation

STATE

Fully fund state programs that purchase agricultural conservation easements, and ensure they meet the needs of young farmers by prioritizing affordability provisions and providing flexibility for projects that create pathways to land access and ownership

Provide tax incentives for landowners who lease or sell land and/or other agricultural assets to beginning farmers and ranchers

Protect farmland ownership and facilitate pathways to ownership for individuals affected by partition of heirs property sales by increasing due process protection for all owners of heirs property

Where appropriate, create pathways for young and beginning farmers to lease state-owned land

② HELP YOUNG FARMERS MANAGE STUDENT DEBT

FEDERAL

Add farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program

Create a restructured loan forgiveness/repayment program for beginning farmers and ranchers in the U.S. Department of Agriculture

STATE

Establish state-level student loan forgiveness programs for farmers

③ INCREASE THE SKILLED AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE

FEDERAL

Expand training opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers and increase funding for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)

Enact comprehensive immigration reform that provides a pathway to citizenship for undocumented farm workers and childhood arrivals

Reform guest worker programs to protect workers' rights and help ensure a sustainable workforce

STATE

Support farmers who offer on-farm apprenticeships and develop effective guidelines through state labor laws

Invest in farmer training programs through state colleges, universities, and technical schools

④ PROTECT AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE FOR FARMERS

FEDERAL

Protect and improve the Affordable Care Act

STATE

Expand Medicaid in all states

⑤ ENABLE FARMERS TO INVEST IN ON-FARM CONSERVATION

FEDERAL

Fully fund USDA working land conservation programs

Expand access to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for beginning farmers and ranchers by increasing the funding pool and streamlining program delivery

Promote climate-resilient agricultural practices through conservation programs like EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Establish a national pilot program to ensure small farm access to EQIP funds

Renew and improve the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to promote public-private partnerships in conservation projects

Expand conservation education and outreach initiatives

⑥ IMPROVE CREDIT, SAVINGS, AND RISK MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG FARMERS

FEDERAL

Modernize delivery of services and outreach at USDA: all loans, grants, and contracts should have the option of online management

Establish Beginning Farmer and Rancher (BFR) coordinators in every state

Offer loan pre-approval for beginning farmers

Establish tax-free savings accounts for farmers

Expand FSA borrower training

Provide training for FSA agents to work with beginning, diversified, and organic farmers more effectively

Reauthorize and fund the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Accounts (IDA) pilot program

STATE

Establish a financial training and business planning tax credit for beginning farmers

⑦ ADDRESS RACIAL INEQUITY AMONG FARMERS

FEDERAL

Increase funding for programs that help historically underserved farmers and ranchers gain access to land and government services

Require collection and public release of demographic data for all USDA programs

Improve recruitment, training, and oversight of USDA field staff to ensure equal opportunities for all farmers

STATE

Establish positions within state agencies to promote inclusion of socially disadvantaged farmers in agricultural programs and policies

Allow access to driver's licenses for undocumented farm workers

Harrison Topp, Topp Fruit, CO. Photo credit: Eva Verbeeck

INTRODUCTION

About the National Young Farmer Survey

In 2011, the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) conducted the first-ever nationwide survey of young and beginning farmers. In our report, we introduced the country to a new generation of farmers who, because of their predominantly non-farm backgrounds and the economic trends of U.S. agriculture, were facing a unique set of challenges getting started. We presented a platform for local, state, and federal policy change to increase young farmer success and organized to advance it within our national network of young farmers and ranchers.

NYFC used these results as a roadmap to guide its policy advocacy at the local, state, and national level. For example, to address a lack of access to credit among young farmers, our recommendations called for a USDA micro-lending program. In 2013, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) created Direct Farm Operating Microloans to specifically address young and beginning farmer credit needs, including a faster application process and more flexible payment terms. In the 2014 Farm Bill, the microloan program was expanded and made permanent, and over 28,000 loans have since been administered.[8]

Now, six years later and in advance of the next farm bill, NYFC surveyed the nation's young farmers for a second time.

In this report, NYFC presents the findings of our second National Young Farmer Survey, uncovering the most pressing challenges and brightest opportunities for our nation's young farmers and ranchers.

We reveal the demographics of this new generation of farmers. We dive deeply into the top challenges young farmers face and examine the trends in agricultural practices, marketing, and philosophy among young farmers. We also discuss which programs and policies are most helpful, from the Affordable Care Act to high tunnel cost-sharing.

Based on our findings, we present key policy recommendations to: address the significant challenges that hold back this new generation, help recruit more young people into agriculture, and unleash the full potential of young farmers to grow their businesses and rebuild rural economies.

About the National Young Farmers Coalition

The National Young Farmers Coalition represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers and ranchers to ensure their success.

With the goal of helping 25,000 young people enter into viable farming careers by 2022, NYFC tackles the most critical structural and economic barriers that prevent motivated young people from starting and growing farm businesses.

Since 2010, NYFC has launched 37 farmer-led chapters across the United States and has built a grassroots base of more than 120,000. We help young farmers become leaders in their communities through local chapter organizing, ensuring they have a seat at the table in local, state, and national policy decisions. We address structural barriers facing young farmers through farm bill advocacy, USDA program reform, and by training key stakeholders and service providers to better serve the next generation. NYFC also provides business services to young farmers, offering tools, resources, and technical assistance to help them navigate business challenges and seize market opportunities.

IN SHORT, WE ARE YOUNG FARMERS FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE OF U.S. AGRICULTURE.

NYFC members and staff at a D.C. Farmer Fly-In, June 2017

Historical Context

Agriculture in the United States is at the breaking point. Farmers over the age of 65 outnumber farmers under 35 by a margin of six to one, and nearly two-thirds of our nation's farmland is set to transition to new ownership within the next two decades.[9]

These circumstances are decades in the making. Federal farm policies and broader economic trends have fundamentally altered our nation's agricultural economy—incentivizing industrialization and consolidation of farms, and leading to the disappearance of millions of family farms.[10] With fewer farms surrounding them, vibrant downtowns have faded. Rural poverty has increased while rural population has declined.[11]

Since the 1930s, farms in the U.S. have continued on a steady trajectory: bigger and fewer. Even as the amount of land in cultivation has changed little, farmland has been consolidated into ever-larger farms. In 1935, the average farm size was 155 acres. In 2016, it was 440 acres. Nearly 70% of all farmland is contained on the 8% of farm operations that are larger than 1,000 acres.[12]

Largely as a result of the 1980s farm crisis,[13] generations of rural youth have been discouraged from entering careers in agriculture, leading to a steady increase in the average age of the national farm population over the last four decades. In fact, only 6% of all U.S. primary farm operators are under the age of 35, and the average farmer is now 58.3 years old and approaching retirement.[14]

Meadowlark Organics, WI. Photo Credit: John and Halee Wepking

Racial Inequity

For people of color and indigenous people, other factors—namely historical dispossession and continued discrimination—have played into the disappearance of family farms and ranches, as well as their underrepresentation among U.S. farm operators.

Indigenous and Native American farmers have faced displacement and relegation since before the founding of this country and in the centuries since. Land and food policies, as well as cultural conflicts, have also contributed to this legacy of marginalization.[15]

Over the last century, black farmers and black land ownership have also steeply declined. In 1920, one in seven farmers was black—over 925,000 nationwide—and together they owned over 16 million acres of farmland.[16] By 1999, those numbers had fallen to 18,000 farmers owning just 2.3 million acres.[17] Today, only 2% of farm families are African-American, and they own only a quarter of the land they once held. The loss of these farmers has been attributed in large part to discriminatory practices by the USDA, which the department itself has admitted.[18]

Hispanic farmers make up the vast majority of the nation's farm workers, but very few are able to start their own farm operations. Approximately three out of four hired farm workers are foreign born, and eight out of ten are Hispanic.[19] But according to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly half of all farm workers do not have work authorization.[20] USDA loans and programs are limited to U.S. citizens, making it nearly impossible for the majority of farm workers to start their own farms.

Young Farmers on the Rise

Despite immense barriers, a new generation of farmers, through creative and resourceful entrepreneurship, is rising to the challenge of transforming food and agriculture systems. For only the second time in the last century, the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture registered an increase in the number of farmers under 35 years old. The results of our National Young Farmer Survey help us understand the next generation of U.S. producers and the unique challenges they face. Based on our findings, the comprehensive policy recommendations at the end of this report—the Young Farmer Agenda—chart a way forward to ensure a bright and just future for farms and farmers in the U.S.

DOCUMENTED DISCRIMINATION AT USDA

In 1999, USDA settled the historical class action lawsuit *Pigford v. Glickman*, which awarded black farmers more than $2 billion to make amends for its discriminatory practices. This was followed by additional USDA lawsuits brought by indigenous farmers and Hispanic farmers, which were similarly won. These settlements, however, cannot bring back what would have been multigenerational family farms and have not solved the underlying inequities that farmers face because of their race or ethnicity.

"The good old boy net had an unwritten system. If you walked in the [FSA] and you were black, the first thing they did was close the books. And they said no to anything that you asked from that point on. They said they didn't have applications. If you got the application, they wouldn't tell you how to fill it out. And then, when you finally got it filled out and turned it in to them, then they hit you, 'Oops, we're out of money,'" recounted black farmer and retired U.S. Army officer Eddie Wise, who faults USDA discrimination for the ultimate loss of his farm and home of 20 years. "[The farm] was the whole thrust in my life right here... I worked [to pass the] farm on to my son. But I can't pass something on to him that the government has taken. It's kind of hard to do."[21]

NATIONAL YOUNG FARMER SURVEY

METHODS

NYFC worked with Dr. Kathleen Merrigan and her team at George Washington University's Sustainability Collaborative and Food Institute to design our survey instrument. The survey was distributed online in January and February 2017. The survey was available in both English and Spanish.

To increase participation in the survey outside of our existing network, NYFC partnered with 94 organizations. Nine NYFC chapter leaders received a small stipend to spread the word in their communities. A partner from the Navajo Nation conducted outreach to Navajo producers to increase participation.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The 2017 National Young Farmer Survey yielded 4,746 total respondents. To ensure our results reflect the challenges and needs of the nation's young farmers, we limited our analysis to the 3,517 individuals aged 40 and younger living in the United States who either currently farm, once farmed in the past, or would like to farm in the future. Although the Census of Agriculture uses 35 years old as an age threshold, doing so in our survey would have eliminated hundreds of farmers and former farmers under 40 whose responses provided key insights for this report.

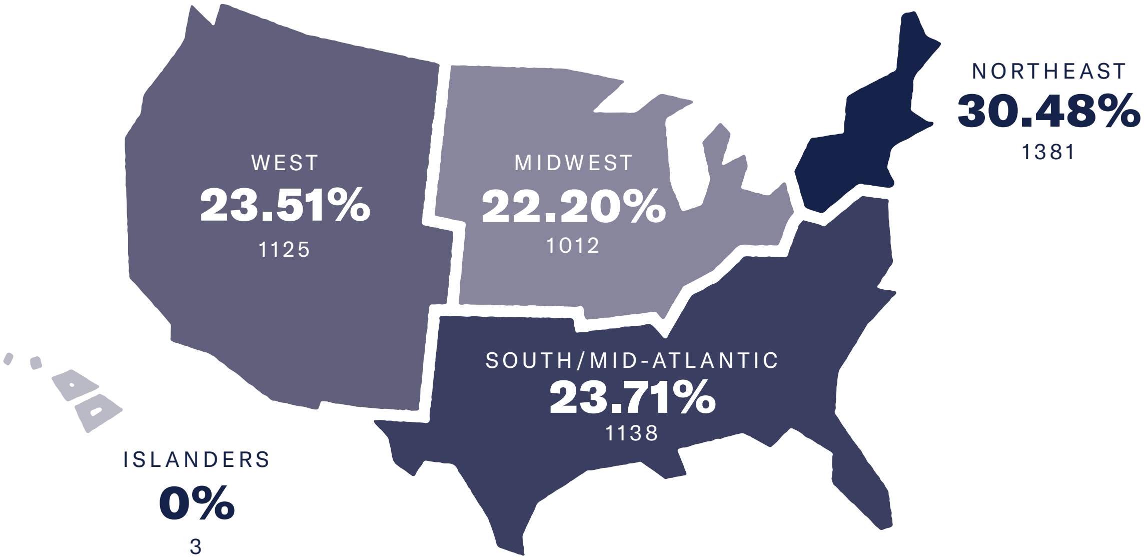
Of the participants aged 40 years or younger living in the United States:

79%	15%	5%	1%
Are currently farming	Have left farming	Are aspiring farmers	Do not wish to farm

Nery Martínez, Santa Cruz Farm, NM. Photo credit: Spencer MacDonald

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Survey respondents hailed from every region of the U.S.: the Midwest, the Northeast, the South and Mid-Atlantic, and the West (with three responses coming from Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands).[22]



22. States were sorted into regions as follows: West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY; Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH SD, WI; Southeast/Mid-Atlantic: AL, AR, DE, FL, SC, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, TN, TX, VA, WV; Northeast: CT, MA, ME NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT.

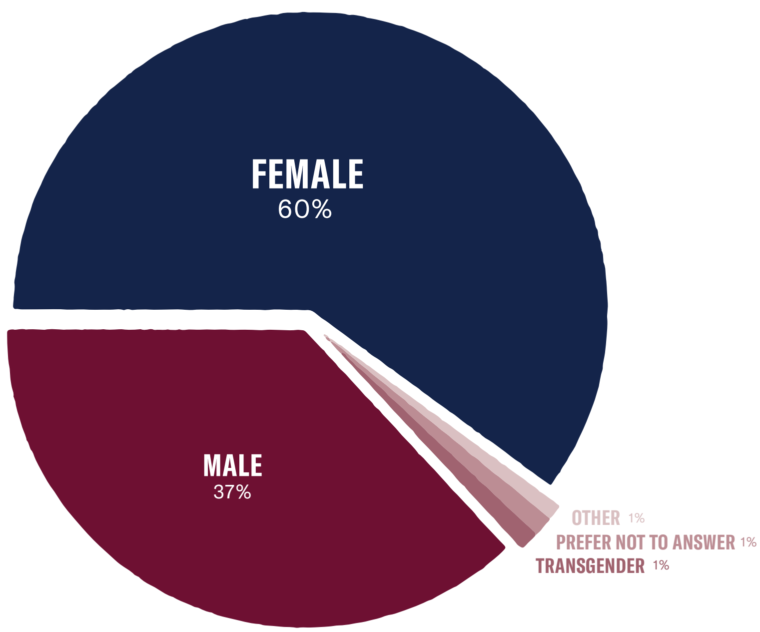
AGE

The average age of respondents was 29.6 years old and the median age was 30. The youngest respondent was 11 years old. It is important to note that the survey results were limited to farmers who were 40 years old and under.

AVERAGE	MEDIAN	YOUNGEST
29.6	30	11

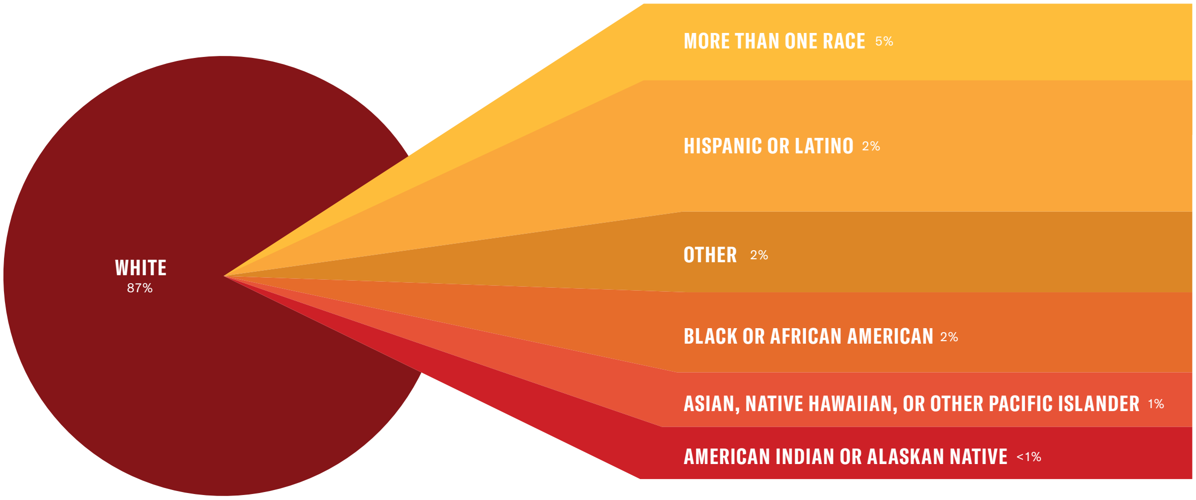
GENDER

According to the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture, most farmers in the United States are older men, with women representing only 14% of principal operators and 30% of total farmers, both decreases from the previous census.[23] In particular, the 2012 Census of Agriculture revealed a 6% decrease from the previous census in the number of principal operators who are women.[24] Our survey, however, suggests that the future of farming is, in fact, female. Sixty percent of survey respondents were female. Thirty-seven percent were male, 1% were transgender, and 2% identified as other or preferred not to answer.



WOMEN ARE LEADING THE FUTURE OF FARMING

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES BY RACE



RACE

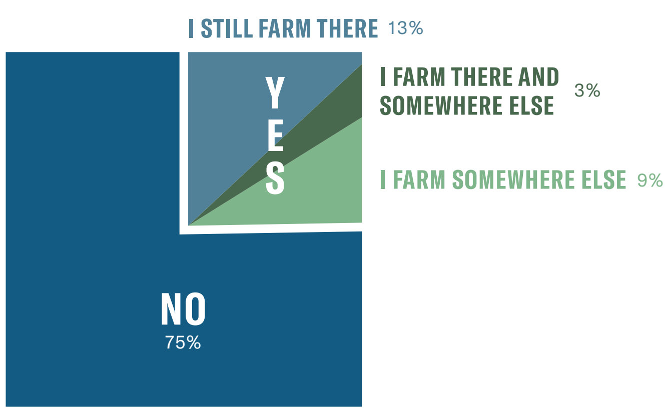
More than 10% of our survey respondents were farmers of color and indigenous farmers: including 5% who selected more than one race; 2% Hispanic or Latino; 2% Black or African American; 1% Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander; and less than 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native.[25]

Participation by farmers of color and indigenous farmers was roughly twice as high in our survey as in the most recent Census of Agriculture, where farmers of color and indigenous farmers made up less than 5% of all farm operators.[26] Our survey did not, however, adequately capture farm workers, and so we cannot confidently use this sample as a reflection of the actual racial and ethnic diversity of the agricultural workforce. Nonetheless, the data does suggest that young people of color and indigenous people are increasingly becoming farmers.

BACKGROUND

Careers in agriculture are attracting young people who do not come from farming backgrounds. Of the current farmers who took our survey, 75% of respondents were first-generation farmers.

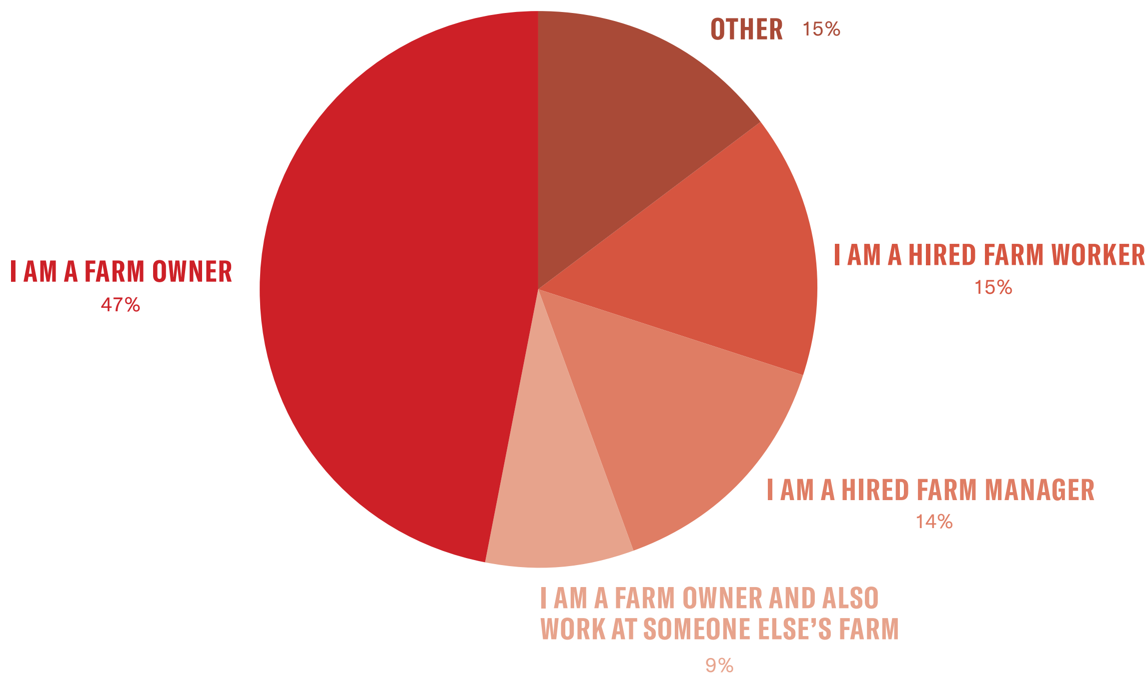
DID YOU GROW UP ON A FARM?



25. Written responses for those who selected “Other” ranged widely and included farmers of color, those who wished not to select a racial category, and farmers who offered a more specific response than those provided.

FARMING STATUS

Forty-seven percent of participants were farm owners, 14% were farm managers, 15% were farm workers, 9% were farm owners and also worked on someone else's farm and 15% were "other." For the purposes of this report, we considered people under all of these statuses as "current farmers."



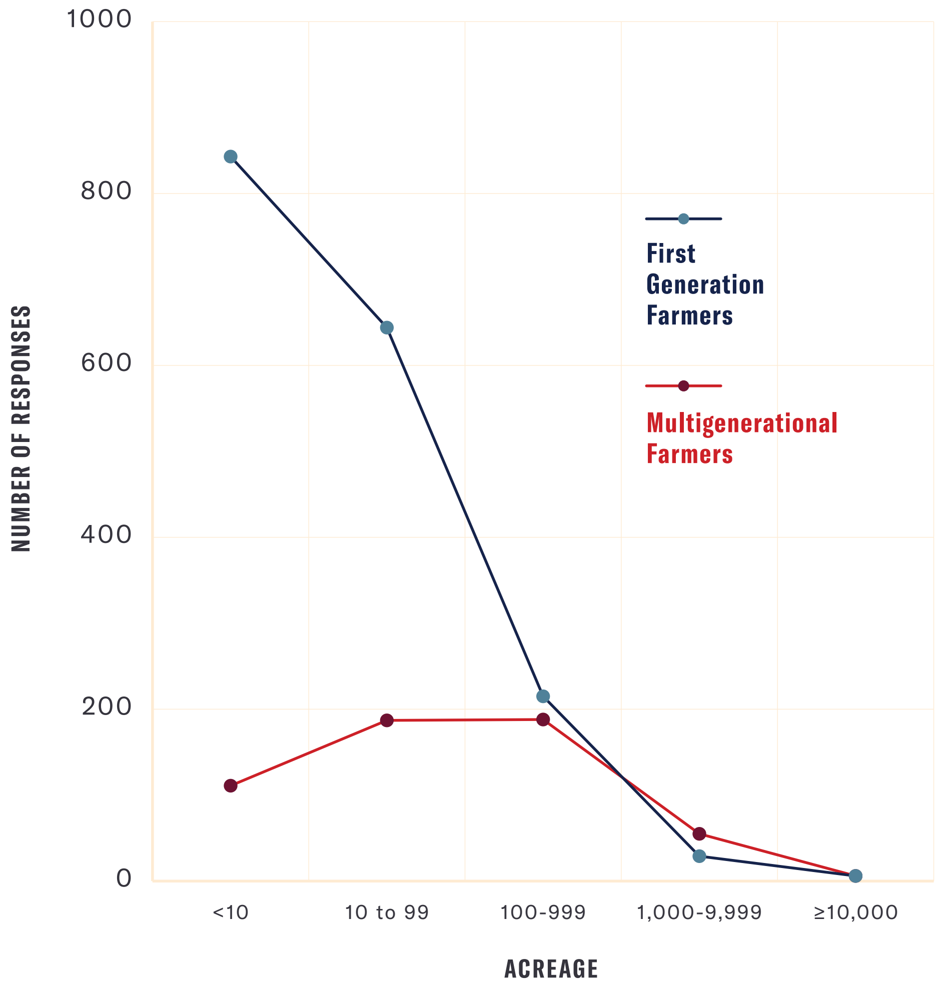
ACREAGE

The survey demonstrated a wide range of farm sizes among respondents, but the majority were farming small-acreage operations. The average size of farms was 276.2 acres, a little more than half the national average of 434 acres.[27] This number was skewed by a few very large farms that drove up the average size. The median size of farms was 19 acres, and 67% of current farmers said they farmed fewer than 50 acres.

The survey showed a large difference in average farm size between respondents who grew up on farms and those who came from non-farming backgrounds.

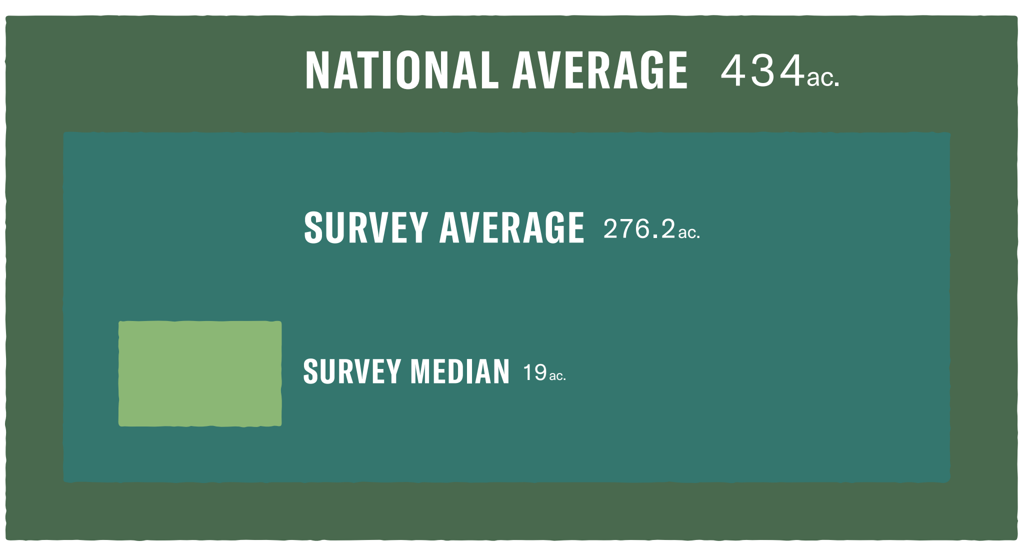
The survey also shows that farm owner respondents are more likely to own their land than rent it, with some farmers both owning and renting land.

FARM ACREAGE OF RESPONDENTS



LAND OWNERSHIP OF RESPONDENTS

COMPARATIVE ACREAGES



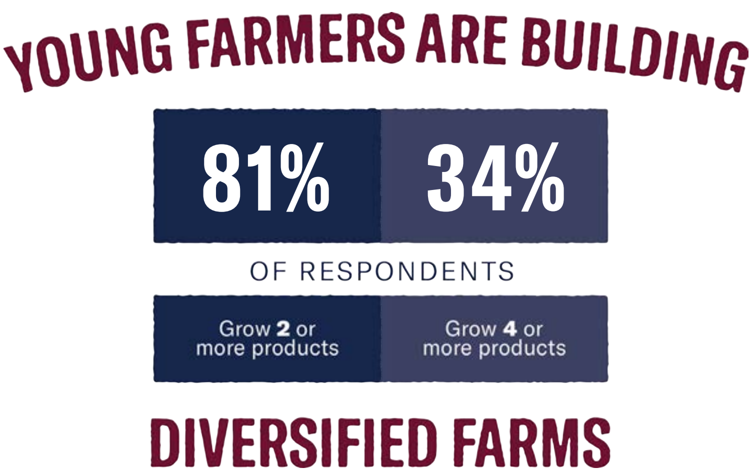
Cure Organic Farm, CO. Photo credit: Kacey Kropp

PRODUCTION

Young farmers are building diversified farms. When asked to select the crops they produce, 81% of current farmers selected two or more different products (vegetables, livestock, grains, etc.) and 34% selected four or more types of products.

Although they are marketing a variety of products, respondents were most likely to have vegetables as their crop with the highest sales (48%). Twenty-five percent of respondents said they make their living primarily from raising livestock.

Although young farmers are diversifying their operations, many still depend on a single enterprise to pay the bills. For example, 38% of respondents reported growing flowers as part of their operation, but only 3% said flowers made up the highest percentage of their sales. Likewise, one third (33%) of farmers grew fruits and nuts, but only 3% said that these crops were their primary earners.



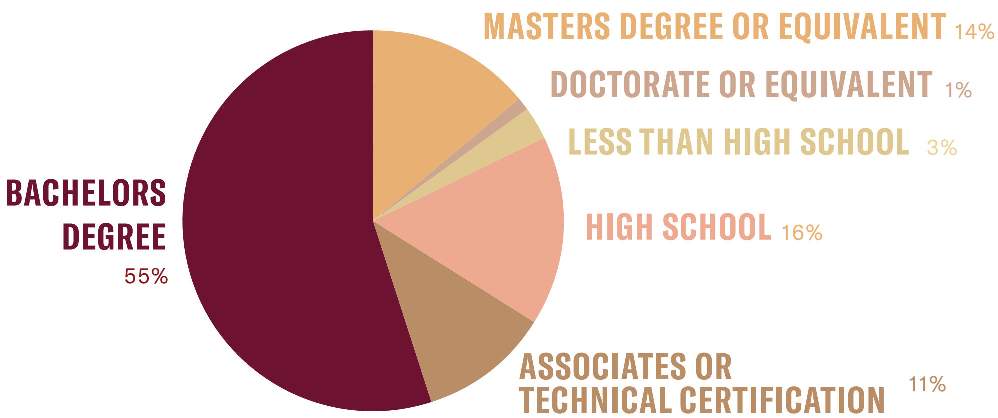
		% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS	PRODUCT WITH HIGHEST SALES*
	VEGETABLES	72%	48%
	LIVESTOCK (TOTAL COMBINED)		25%
	FLOWERS	38%	3%
	POULTRY	35%	5%
	FRUIT AND NUTS	33%	3%
	HOGS	22%	4%
	BEEF CATTLE	20%	6%
	OTHER	17%	8%
	FIELD CROPS	16%	6%
	DAIRY: COWS, SHEEP OR GOATS	15%	6%
	HONEY	15%	1%
	NURSERY, FLORICULTURE OR GREENHOUSE CROPS	14%	2%
	SHEEP	13%	2%
	SMALL GRAINS	11%	1%
	OTHER LIVESTOCK	8%	1%
	FOREST PRODUCTS	8%	0%

*Product with the highest sales denotes the percentage of respondents who report that the given product accounts for the highest sales on their farm. The percentages in this column do not add up to 100% because 4% responded "I do not know."

EDUCATION

The majority of young farmers surveyed were highly educated. Seventy percent of survey respondents had completed degrees beyond high school. Fifty-five percent had a bachelor's degree, 14% had a master's degree or equivalent, 11% had an associate's degree or technical certification, and 1% had a doctorate.

Both first-generation farmers and those who grew up on a farm were more likely than the national average to earn degrees beyond high school. Fifty-seven percent of multigenerational farmers and 77% of first-generation farmers had pursued education beyond high school. This is significantly higher than their non-farming counterparts, on average. U.S. Census data shows just 42.3% of Americans over 25, and 46.5% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34, have an associate's degree or higher.



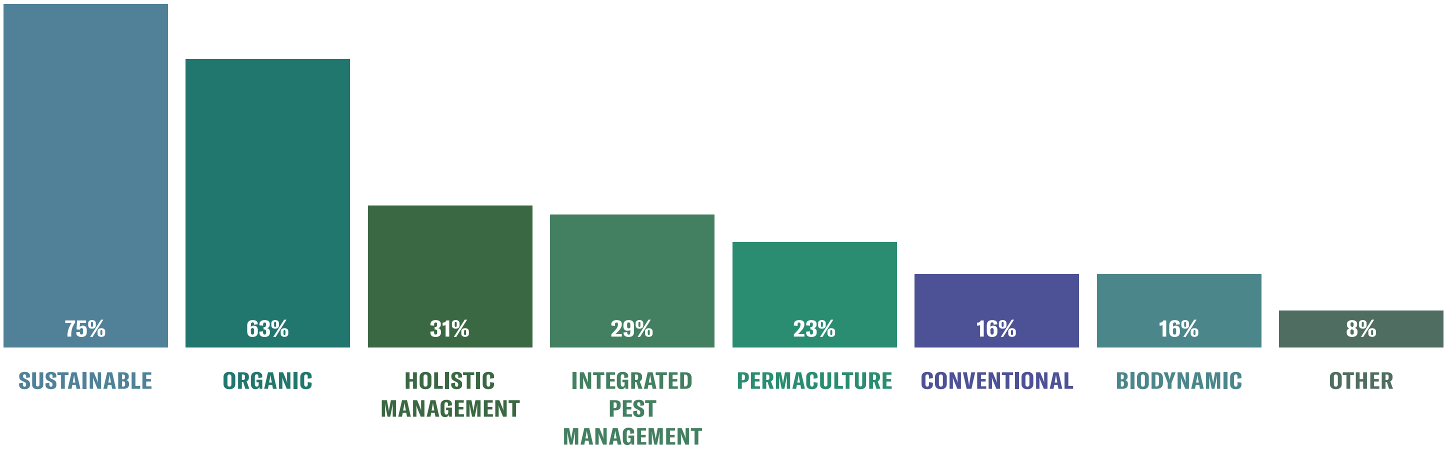
CERTIFICATIONS & PRACTICES

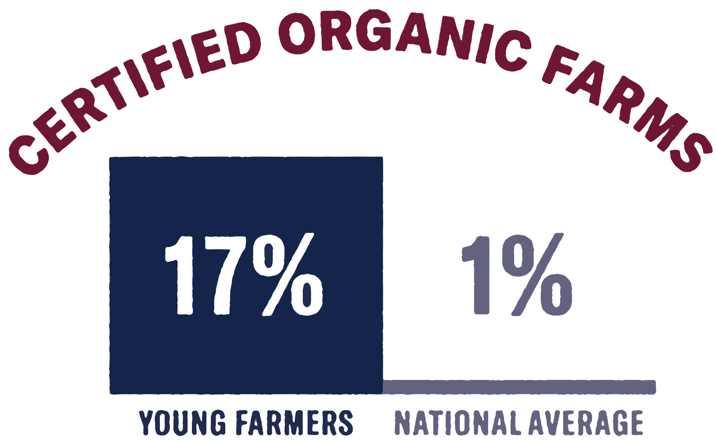
When asked to describe their farming practices using a list of terms, 75% of respondents currently farming chose "sustainable," and 63% described their practices as "organic."

Young farmer respondents clearly maintain a strong commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable farming, but many are not pursuing certifications through USDA and third-party certifiers. While 63% of respondents described their practices as organic, only 17% said their farms were USDA Certified Organic.

Photo credit: Holly Rippon-Butler

HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FARMING PRACTICES?





CERTIFICATION	% CURRENT FARMER RESPONDENTS (2,772)
USDA CERTIFIED ORGANIC	17%
OTHER	6%
CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN	3%
GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES	3%
USDA GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES	3%
ANIMAL WELFARE APPROVED	3%
USDA CERTIFIED GRASSFED	1%
CERTIFIED HUMANE	1%
DEMETER USA (BIODYNAMIC)	1%
FOOD JUSTICE CERTIFIED	0%

WHY AREN'T MORE FARMERS CERTIFIED ORGANIC?

A majority of farmers reported that they are using organic or sustainable practices, but very few are certified organic. Why? Our experience suggests that there are many issues at play, all of which were discussed in our 2014 report, “A Vegetable Farmer’s Guide to Organic Certification.” First and foremost, land tenure plays a significant role. Land that has been conventionally managed needs three full years before it can be certified organic, and large buffers are needed between organic and conventional crops. Some farmers also perceive certification as cost-prohibitive, too paperwork-intensive, or unnecessary because they are selling direct-to-consumer.

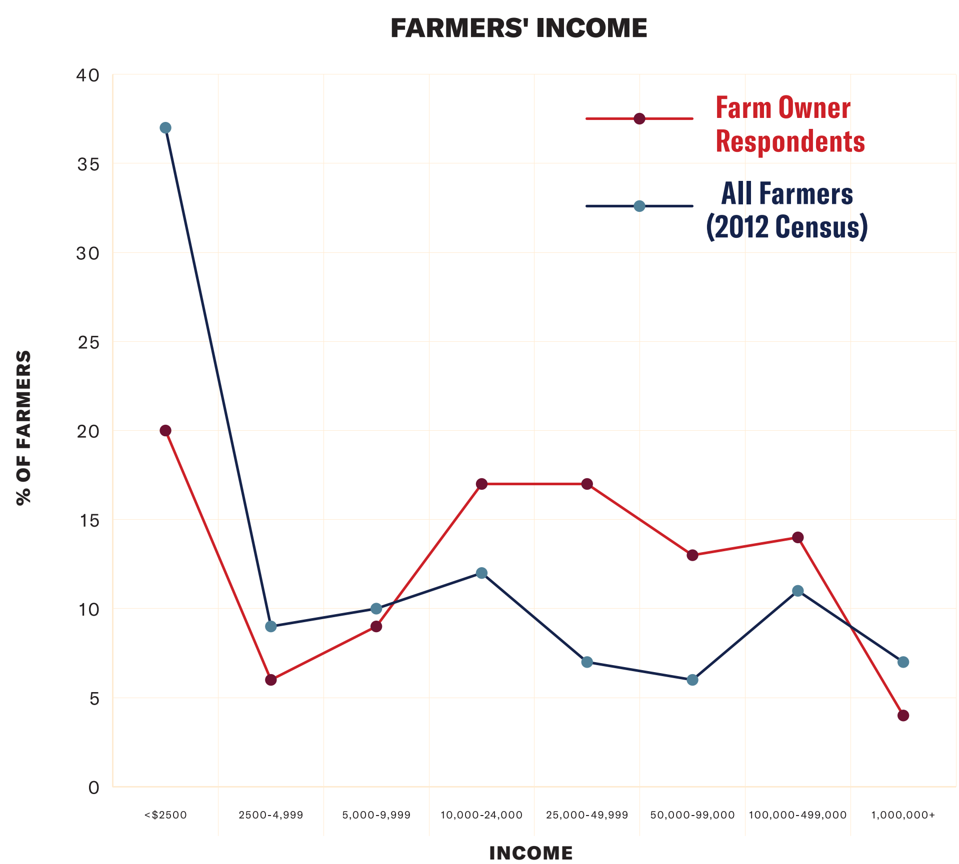
Although fewer young farmers are certified organic than those who report using “organic” practices, this percentage (17%) is much higher than the national average—fewer than 1% of farms in the U.S. are certified organic.

REVENUE

The survey revealed a diverse range of business sizes and sales among participating young farmers, but the overall trends are similar to all farmers in the 2012 Census of Agriculture.[28] As compared to the Census of Agriculture, however, nearly half as many farm owners in our survey made less than $2,500 in annual sales in their businesses—a category often associated with "hobby farms."

Among both first-generation and multigenerational farmers, survey participants tended to fall in the middle sales range, with 60% reporting sales between $10,000 and $499,000 in 2016. A slightly smaller percentage of survey respondents were making over $1 million in 2016 than the national average for farmers reflected in the 2012 Census of Agriculture. Many factors contribute to a farm's sales, but the very small size and start-up nature of farm businesses represented in our sample likely had an impact on these results.

With each additional year of farm experience, our respondents' gross income tended to increase, suggesting that young farmers are growing their businesses each season. This may also be a factor in the level of optimism expressed by young farmers, with a majority saying they are making, or will eventually make, enough income to support their life goals.



MARKET CHANNELS

The survey indicates that young farmers are primarily selling their products direct-to-consumer, seizing the marketing opportunity created by the increased consumer demand for local food.[29]

When asked which marketing channel makes up the highest proportion of sales overall, community supported agriculture and farmers markets together made up 37% of responses.

Which marketing channel makes up your highest proportion of sales overall?	% Of Respondents
COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)	19%
FARMERS MARKET	18%
I DON'T KNOW	13%
RESTAURANT	9%
OTHER	9%
FARM STAND OR STORE	7%
RETAIL MARKETS, INCLUDING SUPERMARKETS, FOOD COOPERATIVES, AND GROCERY STORES	5%
COMMODITY MARKET THROUGH A COOPERATIVE	4%
COMMODITY MARKET THROUGH AN INTERMEDIARY, SUCH AS A GRAIN ELEVATOR	4%
FARM WEBSITE	3%
DISTRIBUTOR	3%
FORWARD CONTRACTING TO SELL DIRECTLY TO AN INDIVIDUAL PROCESSOR	2%
FOOD HUB OR VALUE ADDED PRODUCER	2%
INSTITUTION, SUCH AS SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES, HOSPITALS, FOOD BANKS OR PRISONS	2%
PRODUCTION CONTRACTS OR CUSTOM FEEDING FOR LIVESTOCK YOU DO NOT OWN	1%

WHY IS COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE SO POPULAR AMONG YOUNG FARMERS?

The community supported agriculture (CSA) model is a partnership between the farmer and his or her customers. By paying in advance for their produce, customers are investing in the farm when it's needed most: before the season has begun. This positive cash-flow at the beginning of the season enables farmers to purchase necessary equipment and supplies. This is particularly important for a young farmer who might not otherwise have access to sufficient start-up capital. In addition, the upfront sales allow the farmer to spend less time during the growing season marketing and selling products, and more time in the field.

The CSA model is also a risk management tool for the farmer because the community is sharing directly in the risks and the rewards of farming. When harsh weather, pests, or disease lead to poor harvests of a particular crop, customers may receive less or none of that crop in their shares, and more of a crop that's done well. When the farmer experiences a bumper harvest, customers share in the bounty of the harvest as well. In essence, the crops are marketed and sold before they even enter the soil, allowing the farmer to effectively manage the ups and downs of a season while building a farm business.

CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG FARMERS

REASONS FARMERS QUIT & BARRIERS TO ENTRY

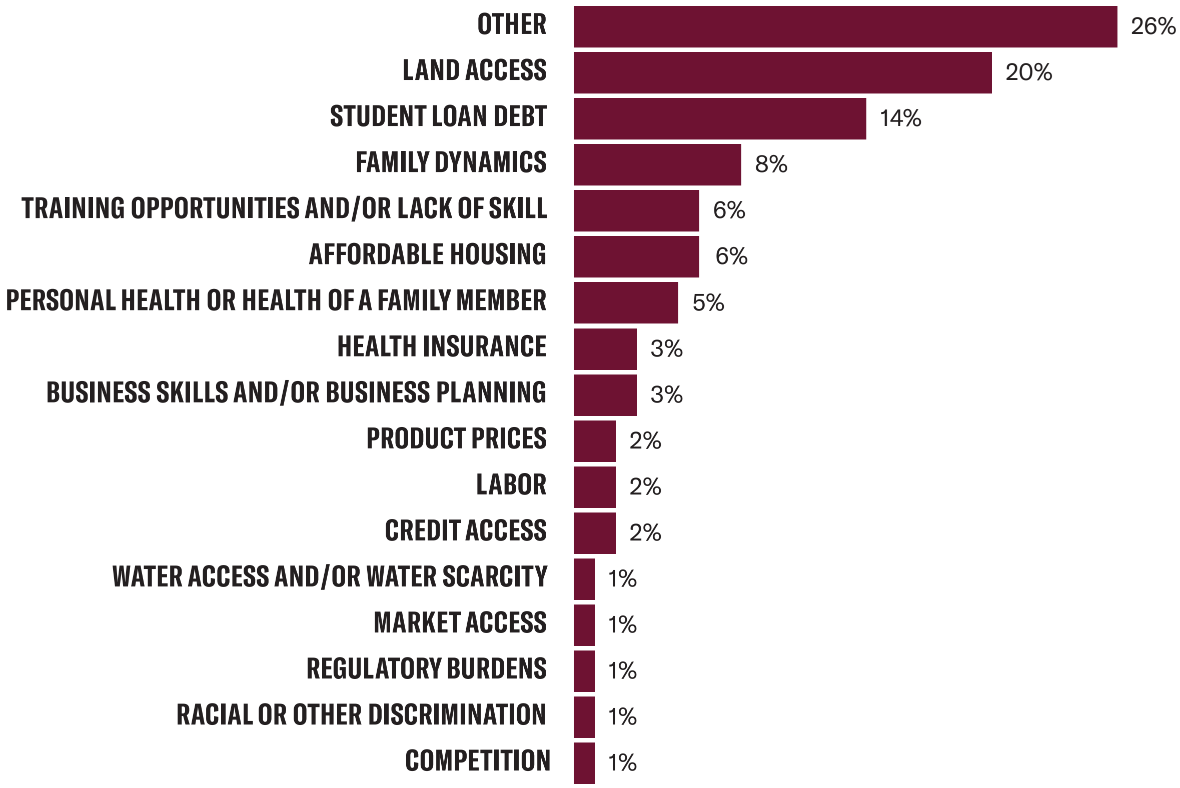
Survey respondents indicated that they were either currently farming, had farmed in the past, or were aspiring farmers. To those who were not currently farming, we asked just a few questions about why they left the industry. For the aspiring farmers, we asked what is preventing them from getting started.

WHY ARE YOUNG FARMERS LEAVING THE INDUSTRY?

Fifteen percent of survey respondents had farmed before but were no longer farming. Among the reasons specified, land access was at the top of the list. Student loan debt, family dynamics, affordable housing, training opportunities, and personal health or health of a family member were also significant reasons cited by those who stopped farming.

Many of the respondents who said they were not currently farming selected “other” as the top reason for leaving the industry. When we looked at their responses, we discovered that most of these respondents had not quit the industry, but were simply in between farming jobs because it was winter. Other respondents selecting “other” referenced a lack of farm profitability.

WHY DID YOU STOP FARMING?



FARMERS SPEAK

WHY DID YOU QUIT THE FARM?

"Family dynamics of parents not willing to pass on the ranch yet, my wife and I had too many student loans and our kids to take care of to earn no money staying there for the next 10 years waiting for it to happen so we moved to the city where we live and work currently and hope to find our own place if/when we can afford a piece of land to start over on."

JACOB SMITH, BILLINGS, MT

"I have worked on four farms (and managed two livestock operations). Low wages/salaries and student debt made it extremely difficult to afford my bills even when housing was provided and state health insurance was accessible."

NATANA ROOTS, MONTEREY, MA

"I was farming in Little Rock, AR within the city limits. After five years of stewardship under a lease agreement, the property owner presented me with an ultimatum—buy the land at an unreasonable price or vacate. I chose to vacate."

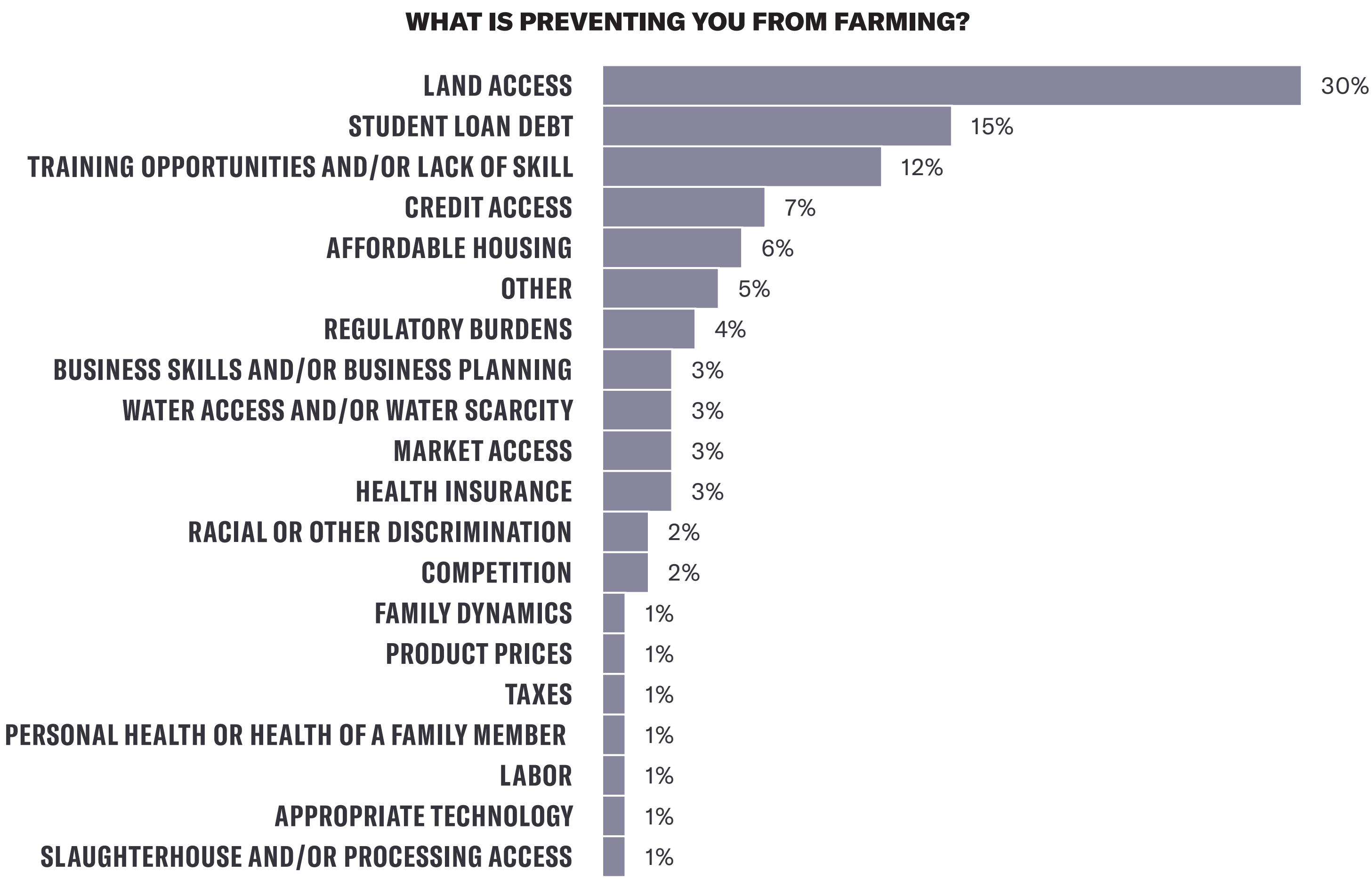
RYAN BOSWELL, LITTLE ROCK, AR

"Inability to find a good paying year round position. I loved working on farms, but only found seasonal work that paid enough for me to meet my living expenses (rent, utilities, phone, insurance, student loans, etc). It was often easy to find seasonal positions that paid at least minimum wage (in KY that is $7.25/hr) but there were other positions that paid well at $11 to $12 per hour. Unfortunately these positions are only seasonal. Year round positions were often apprenticeships and those pay too little to be feasible for me."

LAUREN HUMPERT, LOUISVILLE, KY

WHAT'S PREVENTING ASPIRING FARMERS FROM ENTERING THE FIELD?

For aspiring farmers, as for those who have left farming, land access is also the number one challenge impacting their ability to farm or ranch. Student loan debt and adequate training opportunities and/or lack of skill were also top challenges.



PITTSBURGH, PA

MARGARET SCHLASS

CASE STUDY

Margaret Schlass (far right) and her crew at One Woman Farm, PA.

YOUNG PENNSYLVANIA FARMER LOSES ACCESS TO LAND, EXITS AGRICULTURE.

I am originally from Bethel Park, Pittsburgh, and I am a first-generation farmer. I worked on two organic farms after college and then returned to Pittsburgh to start my own farm in 2009. For six years I built One Woman Farm—a successful and well-loved first-generation farm business—with very little outside capital. At our height, we proudly produced over 30 acres of mixed vegetable crops on three distinct leased farm properties. The farm marketed through a CSA program, four popular farmers markets, and direct sales to high-end restaurants in Pittsburgh.

In 2014, our big break came: we got an opportunity to expand the farm to a third leased property. I attended many meetings with the farm's new owners and they were excited for the farming environment and access to good food. We had a verbal agreement that I would have access to the land for the next 15 years, which meant I would be able to build enough capital to then put a down payment on my own farm one day. I began purchasing soil amendments, lime, minerals, and nutrients, and investing hours of time, wear, and tear on the equipment to bring the long fallow fields to a productive level. With these improvements, my staff and I were greatly successful in expanding One Woman Farm's operations. All of the years of seven day work weeks in order to be able to live my dream of nourishing the greater Pittsburgh community—it was all starting to pay off.

And then I got a text message. On August 31, 2014, eight months into our long-term agreement, the landowner abruptly changed his direction. The news came as a complete shock. I had already committed to long-term necessary soil improvements amounting to thousands of dollars, none of which I was able to recoup. Losing access to that large farm property knocked our production back 50% and I was no longer able to maintain a financially viable business on the two smaller leased properties. Losing access to this very important land put One Woman Farm out of business.

Since losing this lease, I have hunted farmland to purchase in Western Pennsylvania. I've made in-roads with realtors and auctioneers, established relationships with FSA, Farm Credit, and NRCS all in an effort to locate and finance farmland that was going to fit my business' production needs. However, in the end, I was unable to locate a sufficiently sized farm with the necessary attributes that would support me in my efforts of building a commercially viable operation whereby the income generated from the farm's operations could adequately cover the cost of the monthly mortgage payments, necessary infrastructural investments, equipment, and labor.

We are losing farmers and available farmland at alarming rates. Here in Western Pennsylvania we are at a critical juncture. We want farming to be a viable and sustainable sector of Western Pennsylvania's economy. We want to get more healthy, locally-produced foods into our K-12 schools, universities, care facilities, and hospitals. We can achieve both of these goals and significantly impact the viability of our region's food system by creating affordable secure land access opportunities for Western Pennsylvania's current and future generations of working farmers.

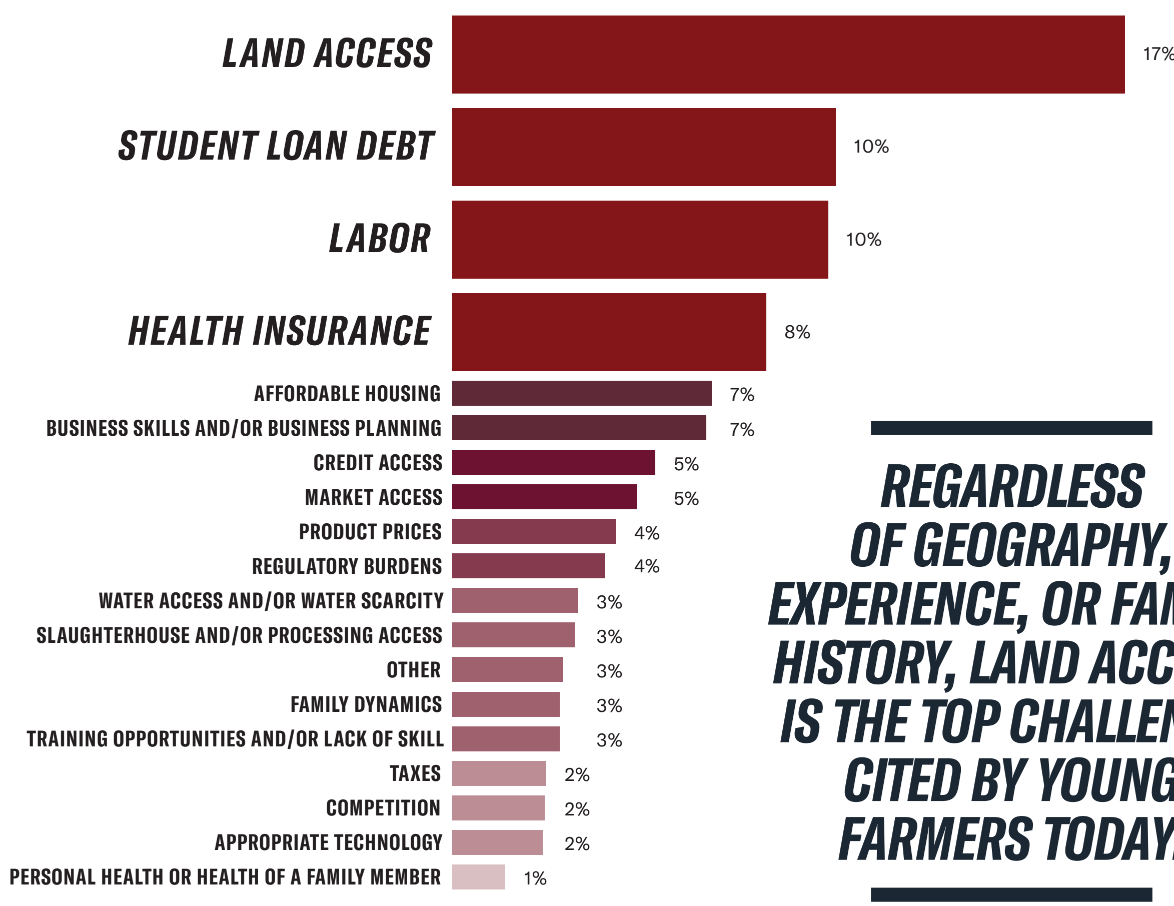
TOP CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG FARMERS

The survey respondents currently farming (2,772) were presented with a list of potential factors impacting their ability to farm and were asked to respond to the difficulty each one has presented to them personally. They also selected which challenge was the most significant.

For current farmers, land access was by far the top challenge with 17% of respondents citing it as their most significant challenge. Student loan debt (10%), labor (10%), health insurance (8%), affordable housing (7%) and business skills and/or business planning (7%) were also among the top-ranked challenges.

Multigenerational farmers ranked labor, credit access, product prices, competition, and taxes as their most significant challenges more often than did first-generation farmers. First-generation farmers were more likely than multigenerational farmers to cite student loan debt.

WHAT IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE TO FARMING OR RANCHING?



REGARDLESS OF GEOGRAPHY, EXPERIENCE, OR FAMILY HISTORY, LAND ACCESS IS THE TOP CHALLENGE CITED BY YOUNG FARMERS TODAY.

IMPROVING CREDIT ACCESS FOR YOUNG FARMERS

In our 2011 survey, we found that access to credit was a top challenge, ranking 4th in top challenges with 40% of survey respondents saying it was a significant challenge. Six years later, credit access has dropped to 7th place. Although further research is needed to draw any conclusions, we believe the USDA Microloan Program bears some responsibility for this improvement. The microloan, one of our 2011 recommendations, became a USDA program in 2013, and the agency has since administered over 20,000 loans. These loans are providing young and beginning farmers affordable credit to jumpstart their farm businesses. The application process is streamlined and the requirements are more flexible.

FSA loans were created to support farmers who cannot get credit from traditional banks, but they are not the only option that farmers are taking advantage of. Farm Credit is a nationwide network of borrower-owned lending institutions established by Congress in 1916 to provide a reliable source of credit to farmers and ranchers. In 2015, Farm Credit made 62,143 new loans totaling $9.430 billion to young borrowers under 35.[30] Congress also mandated that the Farm Credit System serve the needs of young, beginning, and small farmers. Each bank is required to have a program for furnishing sound and constructive credit and related services to young and beginning farmers.[31]

1. LAND ACCESS

Land access is the top challenge cited by current farmers, aspiring farmers, and those who stopped farming. Whether survey respondents grew up on a farm or not, and regardless of which state or region they reside in, land access is the most common challenge they face. For both farm owners and farm workers, finding land that is affordable to buy is the number one challenge.

Secure land tenure is a fundamental component of a viable farm business. Without secure land tenure, farmers are unable to invest in on-farm infrastructure and conservation practices critical to building soil quality, financial equity, and their businesses.

Farmland in the U.S. is a limited resource that has become increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible to the next generation of farmers. According to the USDA Land Values 2016 Summary,[32] agricultural real estate values doubled in the years between 2004 and 2013, and continue to rise in many parts of the U.S. Particularly around our nation's cities—where good access to markets makes land desirable for working farmers—development pressure, high demand from other farmers, and speculation and competition from non-farm buyers has made land prohibitively expensive for young farmers. Young farmers are easily outbid by more established farmers and non-farmers who are able to offer a cash bid or access credit more easily.

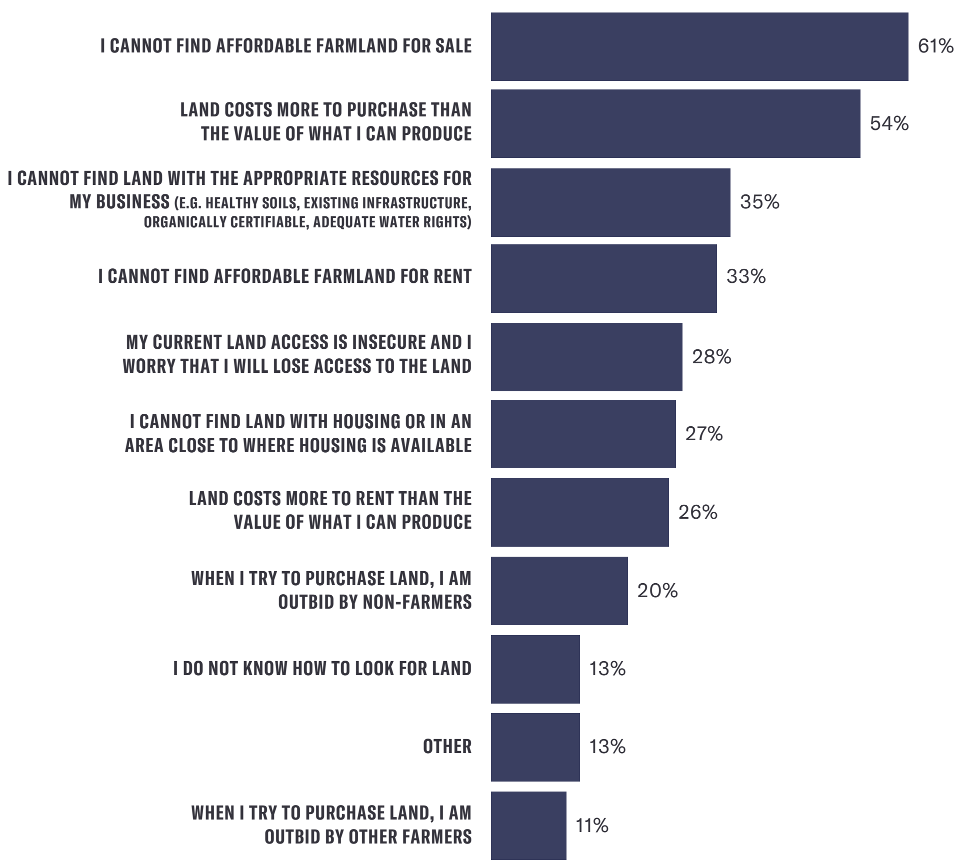
Most often, the purchase price of the land exceeds a working farmer's anticipated profits. According to the Economic Research Service, if agricultural rents were the sole source of return from farmland, in 1951 the farm could pay for itself in 14 years; in 2007, it would have taken 33 years—an indication that our nation's farmland is increasingly being valued for purposes other than agriculture. The relationship between real estate value and production value on farms continues to widen, with one dollar's worth of farm real estate generating just $0.16 in production in 2016—the lowest the ratio has ever been.[33]

This concerning trend was reflected in the survey results. We asked participants what specific factor with regard to land access is the most challenging. "I cannot find affordable farmland for sale" was the top challenge cited. "Land costs more to purchase than the value of what I can produce" was number two.

Land access is a particularly acute challenge for first-generation farmers. Farmer respondents who grew up on a farm both owned and leased more acreage on average than farmers who did not grow up on a farm. Current farmers who grew up on a farm owned a median of 87.25 acres whereas farmers who did not grow up on a farm owned a median of 12 acres.

But growing up on a farm does not equate to secure land tenure. Even participants who grew up on a farm cited land access as their top challenge.

CHALLENGES OF LAND ACCESS



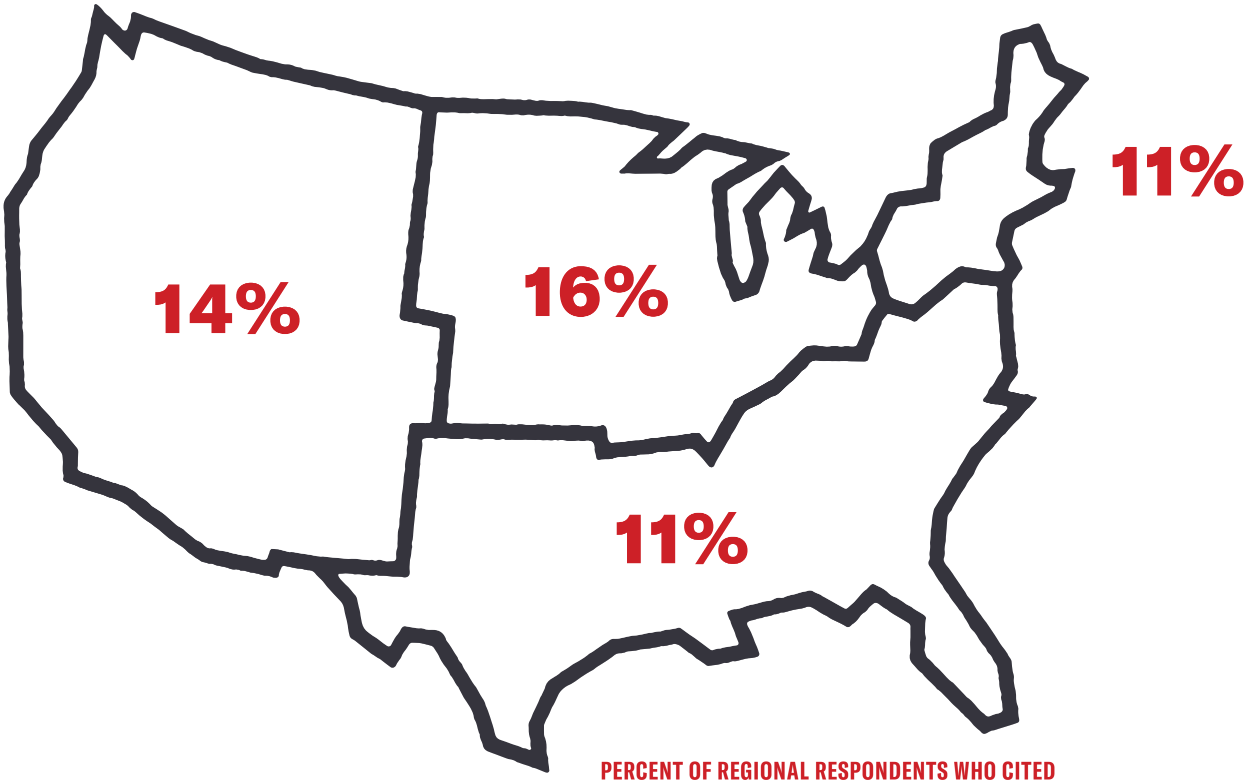
YOUNG LIVESTOCK FARMER FINDS AFFORDABLE FARMLAND AFTER THREE YEARS OF SEARCHING.

Dayna Burtness raises pastured pigs in southeast Minnesota. Her agricultural career began after a summer internship at an organic CSA farm when she was a student at St. Olaf College. After graduating with a Food Systems major, she worked for a farmers market, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and the BAMCO Foundation before starting her own market garden just outside the Twin Cities. When, after only one year, Dayna was forced to relocate her vegetable operation and then was flooded out on her new rented land in Northfield, she began looking for land of her own to practice farm-scale permaculture design, plant perennials, and raise livestock. It took Dayna and her partner two years to find the right property—67 acres of raw pasture and woods in the Driftless region of Minnesota.

To purchase the farm, Dayna first tried traditional finance. "We assumed it would be smooth sailing because my husband works off-farm as a computer programmer, we had excellent credit and were on sound financial footing," Dayna says. But they had a rude awakening when all the banks required a 40-50% down payment on raw, undeveloped land. Dayna and her partner were not equipped to put almost $100,000 down on a $195,000 purchase price.

Dayna eventually qualified for FSA's Down Payment Loan. She says even as a well-educated and financially-savvy couple it was difficult to navigate the process of securing an FSA loan. The number one issue they ran into was that unlike working with a traditional bank, the FSA does not offer pre-approvals. "Even starting the process to see if we qualified for an FSA loan required a signed purchase agreement," Dayna explains. "Needing to delay the closing date by several months due to the slow FSA loan process greatly weakened our bargaining position and completely eliminated the option to buy land at an auction. Basically, FSA loans only work when a seller will give you preferential treatment, the seller is a family member, or you're the only one interested in the land. If someone else had come along with cash in hand during the negotiating process, we would probably still be looking for land today!"

LAND ACCESS IS A CHALLENGE ACROSS THE COUNTRY



PERCENT OF REGIONAL RESPONDENTS WHO CITED LAND ACCESS AS A SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE

MEDIAN ACRES OWNED

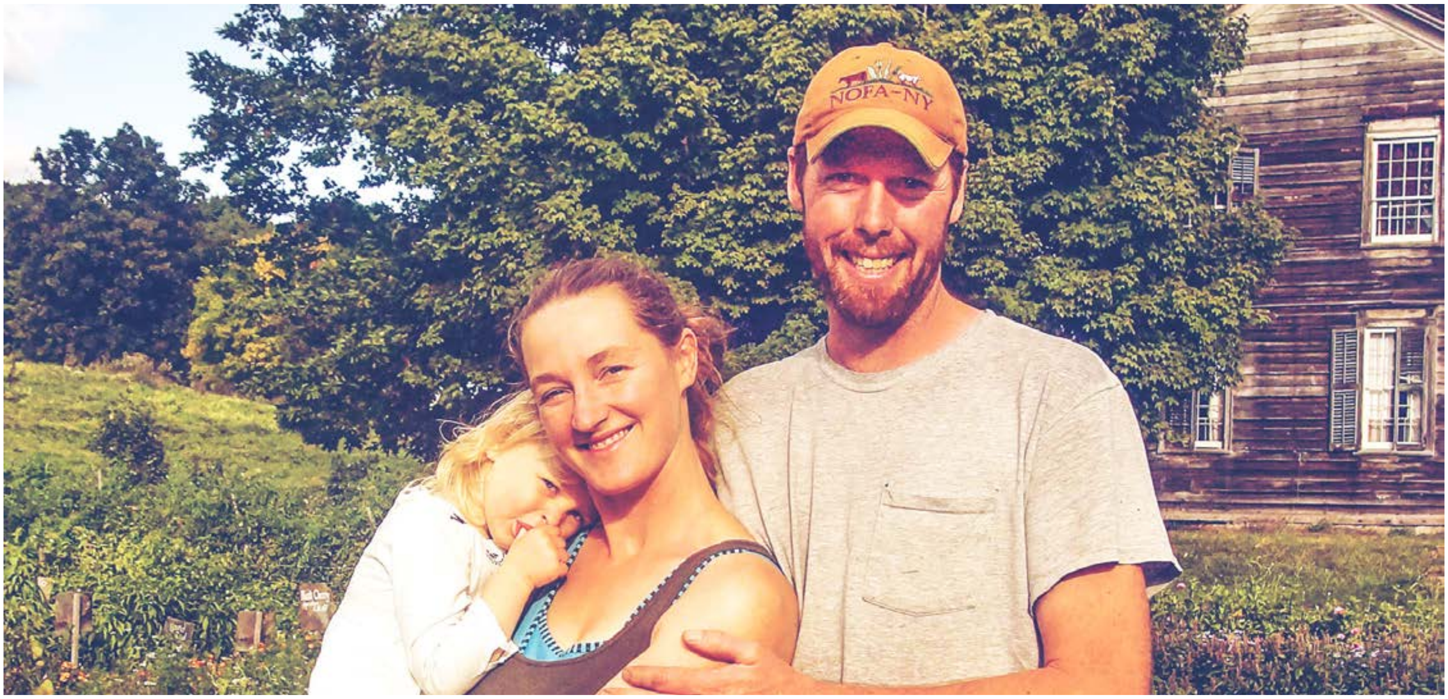
LAND TRUSTS

Over the past 50 years, the land trust community has demonstrated great success in protecting land from development with conservation easements. Unfortunately, traditional conservation easements are not enough to keep protected farmland in the hands of working farmers. Today, the land trust community holds an important key to ensuring this land remains affordable for new farmers. By utilizing stronger, innovative conservation easements that require land to be sold to a working farmer, land trusts can help to keep land prices relative to agricultural value and land in the hands of farmers.[34] In addition to stronger easements, land trusts can offer transition assistance, secure lease opportunities, and other services that create pathways to land security and support farm viability. Over the past three years, NYFC has worked to spread awareness of the innovative tools and strategies that land trusts can use to more effectively protect working farmland. It is important to note that land trusts vary greatly in mission and capacity, however, and are not an option for farmers in all parts of the country. Some state and local agencies, as well as nonprofit organizations, can also act as strong partners for land access.

CASE STUDY

BRUNSWICK, NY

ANNIE AND ZACK METZGER



YOUNG FARMERS WORK WITH LAND TRUSTS TO SECURE AFFORDABLE FARMLAND.

After taking a Farm Beginnings class, Zack and Annie Metzger leased their first farm in central Illinois where their customers were up to an hour and a half away. When they started looking to buy their own farm, they knew they wanted to be an integral part of a growing community.

They decided to return to Annie's home in upstate New York and started working with a local land trust, the Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA), and NYFC to make land connections. Through NYFC they met Rich and Linda Bulson, owners and soon-to-be retirees of Homestead Farms in Brunswick, NY. As the Bulsons approached retirement, they worried about what would happen to their land. The farm's proximity to Albany and Troy put the land at high risk for residential development.

After working alongside Rich and Linda for a year, Zack and Annie started leasing the land and took on their CSA and markets. The farm transition was going well, except for the fact that Zack and Annie couldn't afford to buy the land to start their own farm on the property.

The Bulsons turned to ASA to see if they could put a conservation easement on the property to assist in the transition. The Bulsons could use the easement funds to retire, and by selling the right to develop the property, the value of the farm would be reduced to a price that Zack and Annie could afford. ASA applied for a state farmland protection grant with matching funds from Scenic Hudson Land Trust and was awarded funding in October 2014.

However, they knew it would take some time for the state funds to come through. In the fall of 2015, Zack and Annie received a bridge loan from Equity Trust to purchase the farm. Equity Trust also provided funds for ASA to hold a Preemptive Purchase Right. This gives ASA the right to purchase the farm if it ever looks like it may be sold to a non-farmer—ensuring the land will be a farm forever. The Preemptive Purchase Right made the land more affordable for Zack and Annie by limiting the future resale of the property to the value working farmers will pay for the land.

Thanks to ASA, New York State Environmental Protection Fund, Scenic Hudson and Equity Trust, Zack and Annie successfully purchased the land from Rich and Linda to start their own farm, Laughing Earth Farm. Since purchasing the farm they have established a state-inspected poultry processing facility that allows them to sell their chickens and turkeys via wholesale markets—bolstering the local community and maximizing their reach. Zack and Annie's story is a true transition success story: Rich and Linda were able to retire from their farm and locals continue to feel connected to the land they have been supporting for over 20 years. And, Annie and Zack's dreams are being realized.

"So many people put themselves out there for us and we are truly grateful for that," said Annie. "We feel that we are creating a community where people value food and farm experiences."

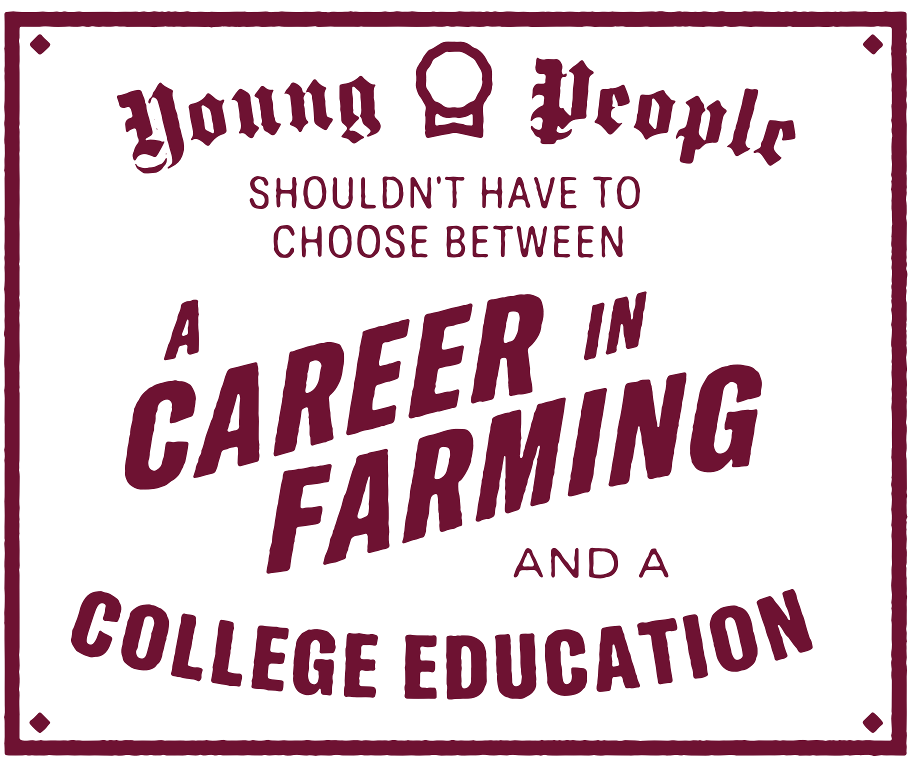
*Thanks to the Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA) for helping with this case study.

2. STUDENT LOAN DEBT

After land access, student loan debt is the most significant challenge our respondents cited. Young people should not have to choose between a career in farming and earning a college degree. But we have heard it again and again—student loan debt is keeping young people from succeeding in agriculture. In 2014, NYFC surveyed more than 700 young farmers on the topic of student loan debt. Respondents had an average of $35,000 in student loan debt. Fifty-three percent of respondents were farming but struggled to make their monthly loan payments, and 30% of respondents said they were not farming or had delayed farming because of their student loans.[35]

This survey showed student loan debt to be the top challenge for 10% of respondents; 46% said it was either a significant challenge or somewhat of a challenge. Farmers who did not grow up on a farm were more likely to cite student loan debt as a significant challenge than multigenerational farmers. Student loan debt was the second most significant challenge (after land access) for farmers who did not grow up on a farm; it was the fifth most significant challenge for farmers who did grow up on a farm.

Farming is a capital-intensive and risky undertaking, and accessing credit for farming is already difficult. When saddled with thousands of dollars of student loan debt, many young farmers are denied loans to launch or grow their farm businesses because of their existing debt burden.



JAKIN, GA
CHAD HUNTER

THIRD-GENERATION GEORGIA FARMER CAN'T GET ADDITIONAL CREDIT BECAUSE OF FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN DEBT.

My name is Chad Hunter and I am a third-generation farmer of Hunter Farms, Inc. Hunter Farms was started in 1937 by my grandparents, John and Mollie Hunter, Sr. My grandfather grew an assortment of row crops and raised beef cattle on his 1000-acre farm. He invested in silos, which stored silage that we grew, and had a feedlot where he would fatten out cattle for market. During this time, John was very successful, but due to changing markets we had to change the farm. The second and third generations have begun to transition our farm from a grain-based production system to a pasture-based production system. A pasture-based production system is more sustainable and better for the animals and the land. Hunter Farms now produces antibiotic- and hormone-free, grass-fed beef, certified by the American Grassfed Association and Animal Welfare Approved.

I am honored to be a member of the National Young Farmers Coalition. It means a lot to have a group of people reaching out to young farmers and helping them overcome the hurdles of giving back to the land. If student loan forgiveness was available for farmers, it would significantly impact the number of young farmers entering the industry and provide growth opportunities for those already farming. Farming is difficult. Physically, the work is demanding and unrelenting. Financially, it is hard because farmers need credit to operate until they can make a harvest. Credit is difficult to obtain with student loan debt and that makes operating difficult. It is great that the National Young Farmers Coalition has recognized this and is giving us young farmers a voice.

If legislation for farmer student loan forgiveness were to come to fruition, it would give me an opportunity to expand our farm in different directions. I would like to add more species to our farm, like sheep and goats. Our 350 acres of pasture is USDA Certified Organic and we can't spray herbicides, but sheep and goats eat many plant species that our cattle leave behind. However, it is not as simple as releasing a flock of sheep into the pasture. Introducing a new species is quite an investment: we have to consider the cost of the species, modifying fencing and more intensive labor, all before a return can be made. Credit for young farmers like me to reach our full potential is a must.

3. LABOR

The shortfall of skilled farm labor has been a growing source of concern among members of the agricultural community in recent years, one that has attracted national media attention. From a thousand-acre almond farm in California to a small CSA farm in Vermont, farm labor is often the single largest operating cost a farmer faces. And young farmers are no exception; our survey participants cited “labor” as the third most significant challenge they face.

Because our survey did not include specific challenges associated with labor, and due to the diversity in scales, crops, and regions among those who took it, it is difficult to determine a single reason that young farmers cited labor as a significant challenge.

The type of farming that young farmers are engaged in is likely a major factor. Fruit and vegetable farms, which are especially popular among young farmers represented in our survey, are highly labor-intensive operations, particularly those using sustainable or organic practices. Likewise, livestock and dairy farmers, which make up a large share of respondents, require year-round labor.

Farm income is likely another contributing factor to the labor challenge for young farmers. With many respondents reporting modest incomes, off-farm jobs, and non-farm financial burdens like student loan debt and health care, hiring help on the farm can be infeasible.

In addition, as young people enter agriculture from non-farm backgrounds and experienced farmers retire, for those who require and can afford on-farm help, there is a dearth of skilled labor from which to choose. In 2015, land grant universities awarded just 461 associate’s and bachelor's degrees in agricultural production—a number that is clearly inadequate to replace the number of retiring farmers.[36] Nontraditional training opportunities and on-farm apprenticeships continue to be important. While 18% of survey respondents reported learning to farm through a college or university program, 68% learned by working on a farm. Forty-four percent of farmers cited working on a farm as the most valuable training experience.

Our survey suggests that young farmers recognize the decline in foreign-born workers[37] and are looking for solutions. Over a third of young farmers indicated that comprehensive immigration reform was extremely important to them, with another 21% ranking it as “somewhat important.” Those respondents who ranked labor as a significant challenge to their farms were more likely to call immigration reform “extremely important.”

CALIFORNIA VETERAN BENEFITS FROM FEDERALLY-FUNDED TRAINING PROGRAM TO START A CAREER IN AQUAPONICS.

My start in agriculture was far from traditional. I didn't grow up farming or in a farming community. I'm from Los Angeles, where tanning spas outnumber community gardens. My interest in a career in agriculture started during my junior year of an undergraduate business degree. At the time California was in the middle of a major drought, and I knew a significant portion of the nation's food is grown in the state. Since aquaponics uses significantly less water and requires less space than traditional soil-based farming, I decided to seek training opportunities in controlled-environment agriculture, specifically commercial aquaponics.

My first stop was a six-week controlled-environment agriculture course led by Veterans to Farmers in Denver, Colorado. This program helped to lay the foundation for my business, Westside Urban Gardens, by providing hands-on technical training specifically geared towards veterans. After returning to Los Angeles, I completed a veteran internship at Ouroboros Aquaponic Farms in Half Moon Bay, CA. Being accepted into this internship was a significant turning point in my career. I learned the ins and outs of operating a successful aquaponic farm, including the development of a business plan. In a lot of ways, my business plan would have been incomplete without this internship.

Ken, the owner of Ouroboros, has a wealth of knowledge. Instead of relying on information from Google, I had a direct line to an expert. He taught me about water usage in his system, the cost and quantities of fish food annually, market challenges and more. In addition, working in the greenhouse full time enabled me to better gauge the time requirements for tasks like seeding, transplanting, harvesting, and sanitation. As my urban farm continues to evolve, I use many of the lessons learned at Ouroboros.

At the beginning of the year I received a $10,000 Kiva loan as seed money to start my farm. With those funds, I was able to secure a greenhouse, and buy my first batch of seeds and growing equipment. Today, Westside Urban Gardens focuses on producing microgreens that are sold at three farmers markets (La Cienega, Venice, Beverly Hills), and to restaurants, private chefs and catering companies. Although my farm has only been in production for five months, I am confident that the skills I learned through my training experiences will contribute to the continued growth of my operation.

4. HEALTH INSURANCE

For young farmers, many of whom are in the early years of starting and growing their farm business and their families, affordable health care is critical to their livelihoods.

Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S., and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that every day, about 100 agricultural workers miss work time due to injury. Though machinery-related accidents are the most life-threatening to farmers, sprains, strains, and fatigue associated with the physical rigors of the job create significant health concerns. Most farms do not offer health care benefits to workers, and farm owners often find premiums out of reach. Without affordable health care options, many farmers must forego coverage and risk financial ruin, or work off-farm jobs to receive coverage, putting significant labor strain on their start-up farm businesses.

AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE IS CRITICAL TO YOUNG FARMERS' LIVELIHOODS

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE THREATENS A YOUNG FARMER'S BUSINESS.

When we first started farming, I did not have insurance, but my wife was on her parents' plan. Once the ACA health care exchange opened in 2014, I was able to afford insurance with a premium subsidy for the first time since I graduated college. We had a really great plan that we loved. Our son was born later that year. He was (and is) covered by the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). After he was born, though, our household size increased to three people. Like many other farmers, our take-home income looks artificially low because a lot of our living expenses (rent/mortgage, utilities, food from the farm, etc.) are business expenses. When we added a third person to our household, our take-home income fell below the level to qualify for a premium subsidy on the health care exchange. Without the subsidies, our insurance plan that we loved went from a $60 monthly premium to a $550 monthly premium. In the 31 states that have expanded Medicaid under the ACA, we would have been covered by Medicaid. Unfortunately, Georgia did not expand Medicaid, and my wife and I have been without health insurance since 2015.

In fall 2016, I had an accident that landed me in the emergency room. While building a new hoop house, my drill slipped off track and I drilled a self-tapping screw through my hand. Luckily, I had no damage to the bone or tendon, which would have required major hand surgery. My hand recovered after a few weeks, but we are still paying medical bills from the incident. That ER visit made us reconsider whether farming was a viable career for us if we could not find a way to afford health insurance.

Access to affordable health care impacts young farmers disproportionately: as small business owners, often our only option is the individual insurance marketplace; many of us live in rural areas with limited health care choices; and we work in a relatively dangerous profession. Without affordable health care, farmers will go out of business. This issue is much bigger than doctor visits or medical bills. Affordable health care affects young farmers' bottom line.

5. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Lacking access to affordable farmland and, therefore, the ability to live on-farm, young farmers often rent housing near their leased farm property. “Affordable housing” is the fifth most cited challenge by respondents overall. Among farm workers, it ranked fourth.

Though housing costs tend to be lower in rural communities, so too are rural incomes, with rural median incomes 20% lower than the national median ($40,038 versus $50,046).[38] Compounded by difficulty accessing land and credit, housing presents a significant challenge for new farm owners as they establish and grow their businesses. For farmers who are not farm owners, the challenge of housing can be especially acute. According to the National Rural Housing Coalition, 60% of the estimated three million farm workers in the U.S. are in poverty—five times the national average.

6. BUSINESS PLANNING

Sound business planning is critical for any farm or small business, particularly in the first years of operation. The challenge of business planning ranked sixth among both first-generation and multigenerational farmers. As overall farm incomes begin to recover after years of decline,[39] providing adequate opportunities for young farmers to access business and financial training will be critical.

* RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Although racial discrimination did not emerge as a top challenge in our survey, historical and anecdotal evidence indicates that discrimination remains a significant issue for many of the farmers who participated in this project as well as the many farm workers who did not respond to the survey.

Because NYFC supports all farmers and their path to farming and ranching, we include racial discrimination as a challenge of special significance and include policy recommendations below to help farmers of color and indigenous farmers find success.

CASE STUDY

ALBUQUERQUE, NM

TIANA BACA

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS A MAJOR CONCERN FOR A YOUNG FARMER AND EDUCATOR IN ALBUQUERQUE.

My name is Tiana Baca and I am a young farmer and educator in Albuquerque, New Mexico. For three years I have had the pleasure of managing a two-acre agricultural education program for youth and adults where we explore the potential for cultivating abundance in the desert Southwest. In addition to running a small CSA, selling at our local farmers' market, and producing value added products, I organize and lead community education classes for local schools, teachers, and individuals interested in regenerative agriculture. I have a M.S. in Geography & Environmental studies. I also happen to live in a shed.

To put this in context, the space I call home has been renovated to be suitable for human habitation. I share a kitchen and bathroom with my landlord and have 121 square feet of my own. This living situation is a financial blessing and it was only made possible with the support of family and friends. It is safe and close to the farm, though only meant to be temporary.

Access to affordable housing is a recurring thought for me. Although I have a robust skillset, manage a farm, and work full-time, finding housing is always financially daunting. Farming has taught me about resilience, creativity, frugalness, and ingenuity. However, these skills are of little use when I find myself up against rising rent costs and inaccessible land ownership opportunities. Minimum wage in New Mexico is far below the actual living wage for our state. Consider this reality in the context of farming, where our labor input is rarely adequately compensated (even as farm managers) and the problem is exacerbated. Despite the visible poverty across the state, development continues, which further pushes arable land financially out of reach of eager farmers. While access to farmland is a major concern (I'd like to own my own farm someday), the immediate threat is simply finding a place to call home.

Because of a strong support network of friends and family, I have been able to navigate these challenges. However, for those in our community without such webs of support, access to affordable housing is even more daunting. We need more affordable housing options. We need to support young and beginning farmers and acknowledge that the face of farming is changing. If we want a robust agricultural community, we must ensure that the necessities of life are easily and adequately met.

MOST HELPFUL PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG FARMERS

The survey presented respondents with a wide-ranging list of policies, programs, or institutions relevant to farming and farm businesses, and asked them to rank each one (when applicable) as “not helpful,” “somewhat helpful,” or “very helpful.” The Affordable Care Act was the most helpful policy cited by respondents, underscoring the importance of health care to farmers.

Most Helpful Policy, Program or Institution	*% of Respondents (1,962)*
AFFORDABLE CARE ACT (OBAMACARE OR HEALTH INSURANCE EXCHANGES)	15%
COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)	12%
FAMILY AND/OR CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE	10%
STUDENT LOAN FORGIVENESS	8%
FARMERS MARKETS	8%
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION	6%
USDA FARM LOAN PROGRAMS	5%
LOCAL/REGIONAL FOOD MARKETING	5%
TRAINING PROGRAMS	4%
OTHER	3%
USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS	3%
CROP INSURANCE	3%
STATE GRANTS	2%
FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS	2%
LAND TRUSTS	1%
LAND LINKING PROGRAMS	1%

Jalal Sabur, NY

1. AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Although the Affordable Care Act falls outside the realm of farm programs, it has risen to the top of the list of federal programs beneficial to young farmers, with 15% of respondents selecting it as the most helpful program and 61% citing it as either somewhat helpful or very helpful.

A May 2017 report published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* confirms this, finding that farmers aged 18 to 35 years old held a much more positive opinion of the ACA than their older counterparts and were significantly more likely than older farmers to believe the ACA benefitted their family and reduced their need for an off-farm job.[40]

A number of key provisions in the Affordable Care Act have helped close the coverage gap for young and beginning farmers, including Medicaid expansion (in states that have done so), the ability of those under 26 years old to remain on their parents' plans, and the ban on denying coverage due to preexisting conditions. Medicaid expansion in particular has allowed young farmers to invest more income and energy into growing their rural businesses, reduced their need for off-farm jobs, and made it more possible to start families. In states where there has not been an expansion of Medicaid, young farmers often go without care, risking financial ruin in the event of an accident or illness.

2. COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)

The community supported agriculture (CSA) model creates shared risk between the farmer and his or her customers and provides critical capital at the beginning of the season when it's needed most. For diversified growers, this partnership with customers enables the farmer to build personal relationships with customers and receive a larger portion of the food dollar by cutting out a middleman.

3. FAMILY AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

For participants who grew up on a farm, family and/or cultural knowledge was the most helpful policy, program, or institution cited. Family knowledge and mentors are a critical resource in farm planning. On multigenerational farms, there is often a family member who knows the particular nuances of the land, such as which fields are most productive and which tend to flood. Farming also requires an assortment of technical skills, including carpentry, welding, engine repair, and plumbing. Young farmers who grow up on a farm may be exposed to or trained in these important skills early, or have a skilled family member to help when they need it.

Multigenerational farmers also inherit family and community connections that are critical to their success and may give them more of an opportunity to understand how USDA works and what programs are available, have a relationship with the local bank and suppliers, and learn about market opportunities and equipment for sale.

4. APPRENTICESHIPS

Young farmers from non-farm backgrounds must seek alternative methods to learn how to farm. Twenty-nine percent of survey respondents learned to farm through an apprenticeship program and 65% said apprenticeship programs were either somewhat helpful or very helpful. An apprenticeship, in which a young farmer learns the ropes from a mentor farmer over the course of a season, allows an aspiring farmer to learn how to farm without taking on additional debt. Many young farmers are discovering farming in college, and an apprenticeship allows them to learn from a mentor farmer before starting their own farm business. Our survey found that apprenticeships are more important to young farmers who did not grow up on a farm.

It is important to note that apprenticeships are not a viable option for many young people, including those with student loans, who cannot afford to receive only experience or a small stipend in exchange for their labor. Because apprenticeship wages are low, young farmers must have a level of privilege to seek and take these positions. In this way, our apprenticeship system is discriminating against low-income aspiring farmers who cannot afford to do apprenticeships to gain the skills needed.

5. FARMERS MARKETS

Like community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers markets are direct-to-consumer marketing channels that allow young farmers to capture a higher percentage of the food dollar. As consumer demand for local food continues to increase, young farmers use farmers markets to reach consumers and build their brand. Because this is a common entry point for young farmers starting their careers, a number of federal programs that promote local and regional food systems directly and indirectly benefit young farmers, including: Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG), the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP), Farm Storage Facility Loans (FSFL), and the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) program.

6. EXTENSION

Land-grant university extension services provide research-based information, programs, and technical assistance to farmers, and many are now investing in targeted services for new farmers. Extension agents and offices are often a young farmer’s first point of contact with agricultural experts and business planning experts, and can provide young farmers with information about the range of services that USDA provides.

YOUNG FARMERS AND THE USDA

YOUNG FARMERS' PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Since NYFC's founding in 2010, significant progress has been made in expanding young and beginning farmer access to critical farm services. We've worked with organizational partners, Congress, and USDA to:

1. **Improve training to make field staff more aware of the challenges young farmers face and the business models and farming practices they're using;**
2. **Increase the number of USDA staff specifically dedicated to beginning farmer outreach;**
3. **Modify program terms and applications to be more flexible and scale-appropriate for young farmers; and**
4. **Make beginning farmers more competitive in conservation cost-share programs.**

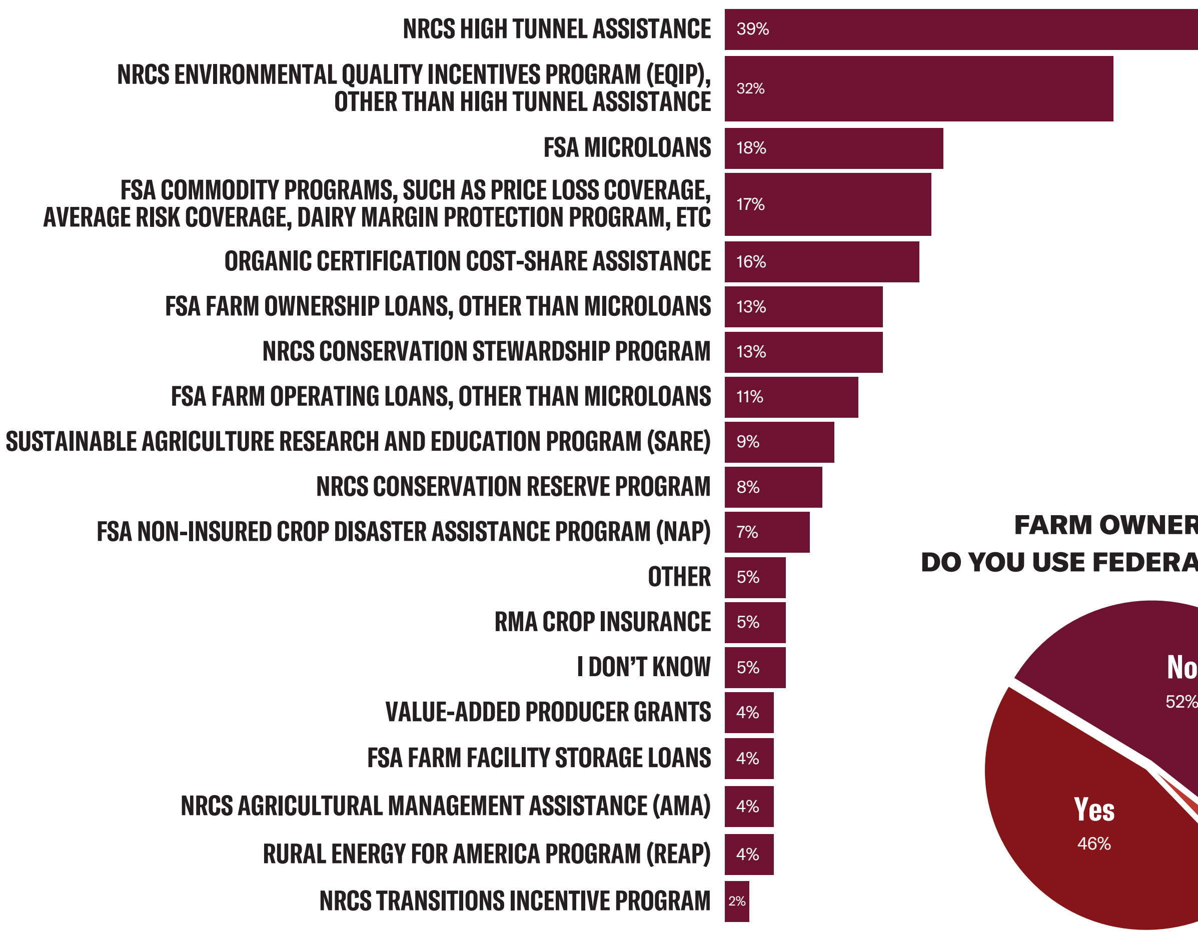
Our survey indicates that some of these efforts have been a success. The NRCS EQIP High Tunnel System Initiative, for instance, was the most used federal program among young farmers. Thirty-nine percent of farm owner respondents reported using this program. The high tunnel initiative is an excellent example of using an existing conservation program to improve young farmer access to competitive cost-share funds, create positive conservation outcomes, and improve farm viability in the process.

Overall, however, only 46% of farm owners reported using federal programs.

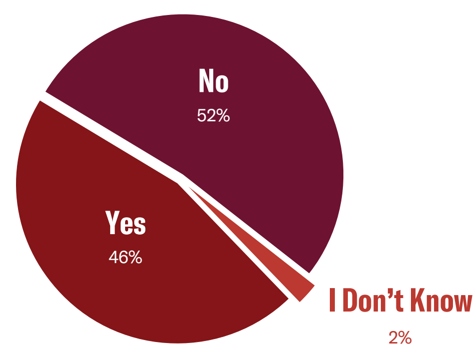
First-generation farm owners, in particular, were less likely to have used federal programs. Fifty-two percent of farm owners who grew up on a farm reported using federal programs versus only 43% of farm owners who did not grow up on a farm.

Farm Owners Only: Federal Programs Used

% Total Respondents



FARM OWNERS ONLY: DO YOU USE FEDERAL PROGRAMS?



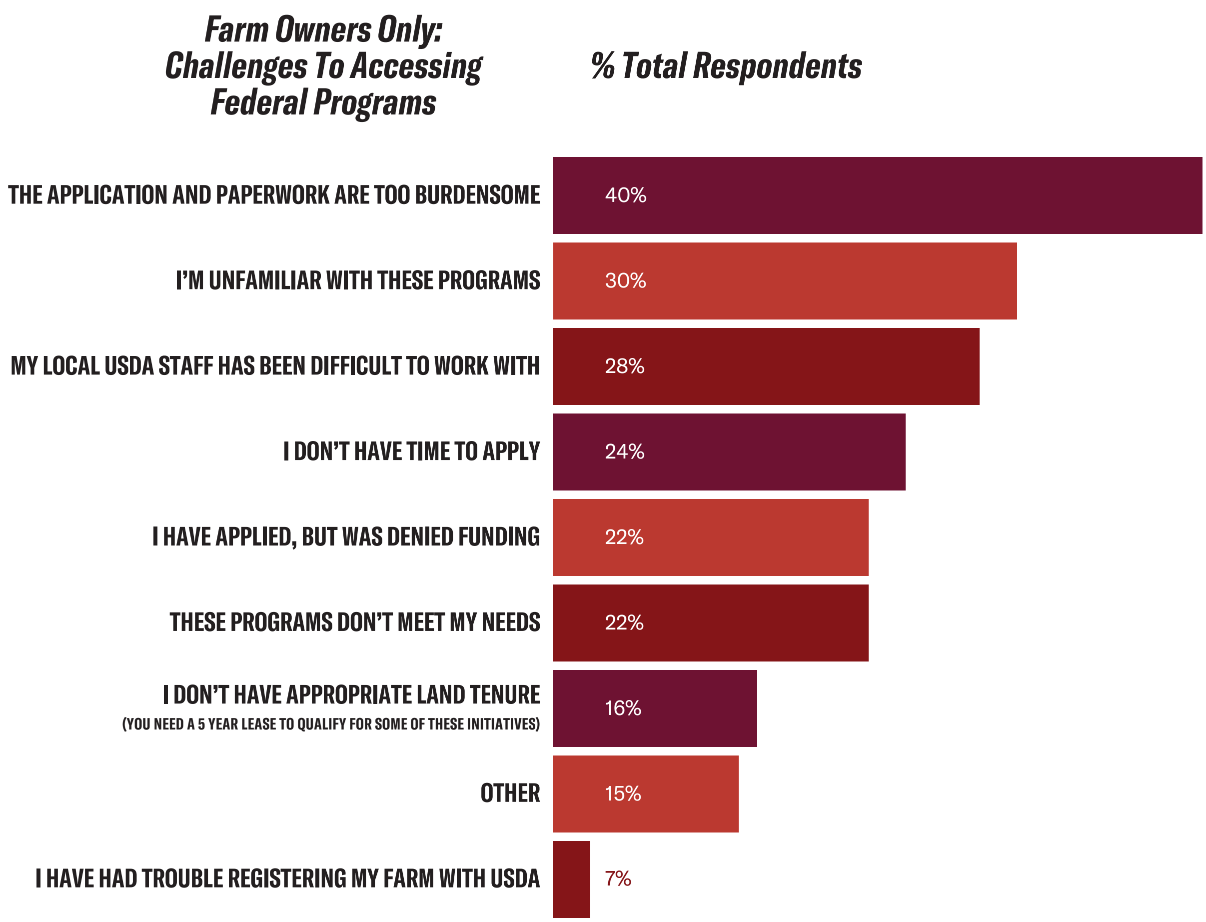
THE TOP FIVE PROGRAMS, AS CITED BY:

MULTIGENERATIONAL FARMERS	*FIRST-GENERATION FARMERS*
❶ FSA Commodity Programs such as Price Loss Coverage, Average Risk Coverage, Dairy Margin Protection Program, etc.	❶ NRCS High Tunnel Assistance
❷ NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	❷ NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
❸ NRCS High Tunnel Assistance	❸ FSA Microloans
❹ NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program	❹ Organic Certification Cost-Share Assistance
❺ FSA Farm Operating Loans	❺ NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program

BARRIERS TO USE OF USDA PROGRAMS

America's aging farm population is set to retire in the coming decades. To support the next generation of farmers and ranchers, transition productive farmland, and revitalize our nation's rural communities, considerable progress must still be made in the way USDA serves young farmers, who are its customers, stakeholders, and land stewards of the future.

In our survey, we asked participants what, if any, challenges they had encountered accessing federal programs. Lack of familiarity with the programs was the number one challenge among all respondents. Among farm owners only, 40% said the application and paperwork were too burdensome, 30% said they were unfamiliar with the federal programs listed, and 28% said their local staff had been too difficult to work with.



YOUNG FARMER LOSES THE OPPORTUNITY TO PURCHASE HIS FARM DUE TO GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN.

Matt Linehan of Sparrow Arc Farm in Copake, NY, currently farms over 100 acres and employs between six and thirteen people each season. Prior to this arrangement, Matt had the opportunity to purchase a 260-acre farm in southern New England, but he lost the property before closing due to a loss of funding from USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Matt was looking to relocate his small farm in Central Maine to land closer to desired markets in southern New England at a time when his established business was ready to grow. Like many young farmers in the U.S., Matt needed a loan to purchase his land. He explored his options with both FSA and Farm Credit Services of America. He was delighted to receive news—after a one-year process—that he had been approved for three loans from FSA: $300,000 for land acquisition, $150,000 in operating loans, and another $150,000 for equipment. Because he was scaling up so quickly, however, he also needed the combined effort of Farm Credit to raise the total amount of capital necessary to secure the farmland. Sparrow Arc Farm was about to reach a new threshold when a government shutdown froze all hiring and fund distribution at USDA. Matt made every effort to re-secure the loans that had been approved for his new farm, but there wasn't much he could do beyond pleading with the loan officers. The purchase of sale on the land expired in early 2013, and the FSA program could not meet their promised funding amount beforehand. In fact, they couldn't provide any funding at all. Matt lost the opportunity to purchase the land and had to start his search again.

In April, Matt got a call from the loan officer letting him know that FSA was now ready to disburse the funds for his new farm. He gave them the news that the sale had expired, but he went to talk to the landowner anyway. The owner of the property told Matt he would only sell for $75,000 more than his original asking price. Unfortunately, FSA will only cover the appraised value of land, and this additional cost pushed the price of Matt's dream farm over the limit. FSA was still not able to aid Matt in securing this land. Matt now leases land in upstate New York but knows that he will have to eventually endure the process with FSA once again if he plans to buy a farm. He believes that it will be a necessity for him, as he sees farming as a forever career and would like to retire on equity someday. Although his experience with FSA was a negative one, Matt hasn't lost hope that he can make his dream a reality. He expresses concerns about FSA being the sole program for young farmer funding and hopes that in the future there will be more options. Finding good farmland was hard for Matt, like it is for many young farmers, and securing that land should not be as hard as it was for him.

ALABAMA CATTLE FARMER GROWS HIS BUSINESS THANKS TO THE USDA MICROLOAN PROGRAM.

Lee Brooks has been a part-time farmer for eight years, running a cow-calf operation in Linden, Alabama. He raises Black Angus calves on pasture for the local stockyard and sells them at around seven months old. He grew up in a farming community and now farms on his family's 60 acres. Lee's day job is trucking; he hauls wood chips from a local chip mill to paper mills in Mississippi and Alabama.

Lee learned of the FSA microloan program through Andrew Williams with the Deep South Food Alliance. At the time, he had eight to ten cows but wanted to grow the herd. He was approved for $35,000 that helped him acquire 18 Black Angus cows. A year later, he was approved for $15,000 more which helped him purchase a tractor for brush hogging, haying, and disking. The process was fairly smooth: his FSA loan officer relayed what information he would need to provide beforehand, and Tuskegee Cooperative Extension helped him fill out all the paperwork in person. He completed a farm visit and received the funds about one month later.

While Lee was skeptical because of the historical issues between FSA and black farmers he had heard about, he was willing to try for a microloan when Andrew suggested it. He has another three years of payments on the loan, but is considering an ownership loan to purchase more land as he continues to grow his farm business. Lee had a great experience with FSA and is willing and eager to apply for more funding in the future.

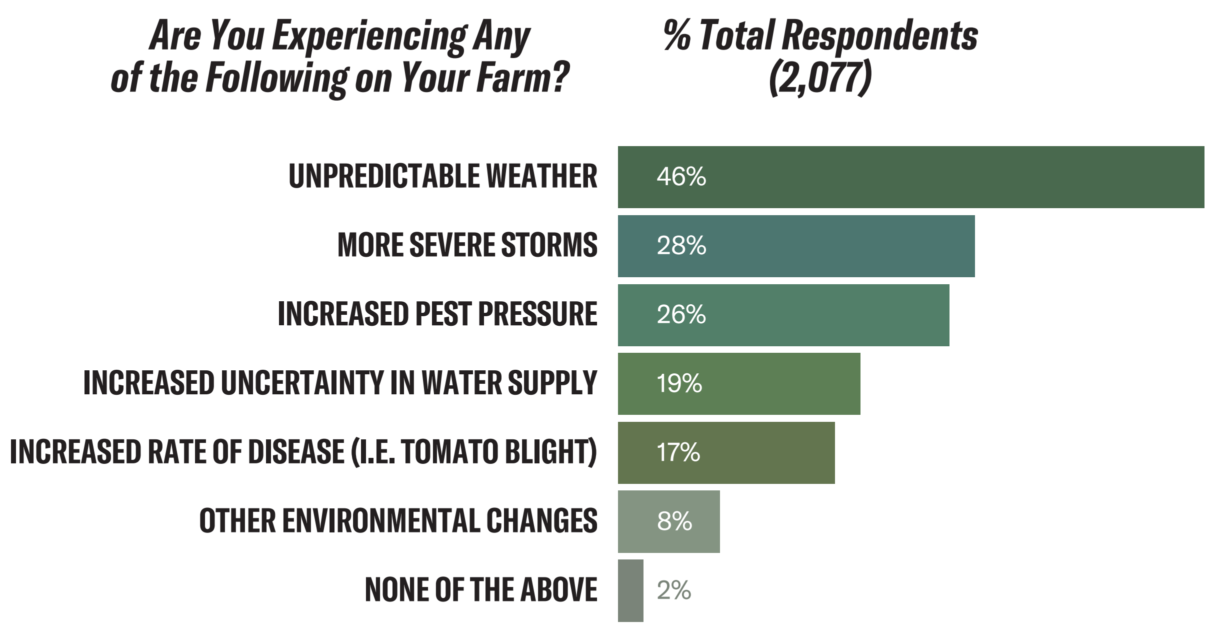
CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENT

We asked respondents whether or not they have experienced a number of weather and environmental changes on their farms. Sixty-six percent of respondents said that they had experienced changes on their farms and 53% of respondents attributed these changes to climate change.

This finding is consistent with NYFC's 2016 survey of young farmers and ranchers in the Colorado River Basin, which found that climate change was the third most frequently cited agricultural concern among respondents.[41] That survey also found that young farmers prioritize on-farm conservation efforts known to help farmers adapt to and mitigate climate change.

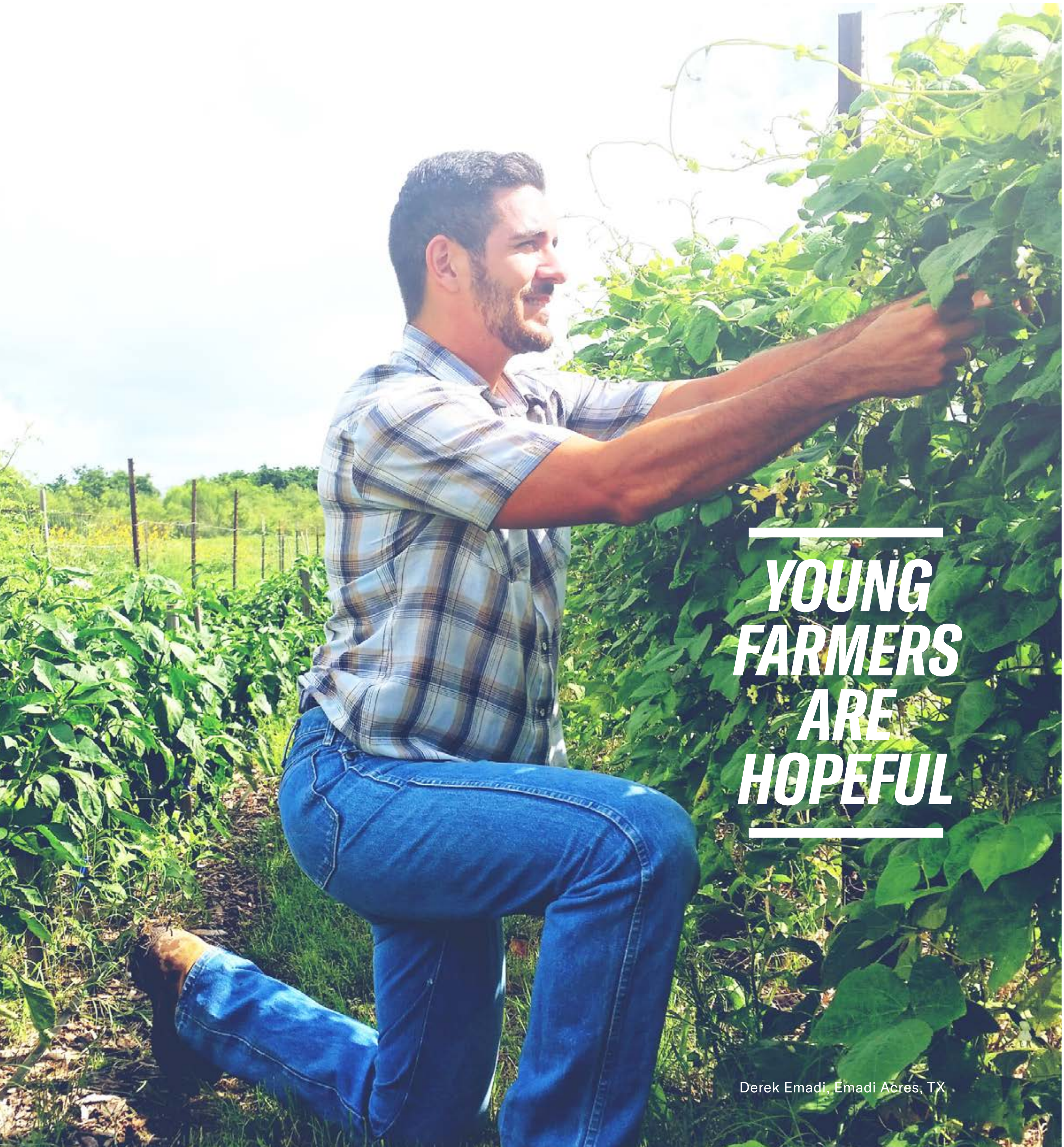
Public opinion polling indicates that young Americans are more likely than their older counterparts to believe in climate change. A 2016 University of Texas poll found that 91% of millennials, compared to 74% of those over 65, believed that climate change is occurring.[42] Young farmers are on the frontlines of climate change, experiencing unpredictable weather, severe storms, drought, pests, and disease. As our survey indicates, however, young farmers are also leading the way in mitigating its impacts. They are farming in a way that increases their resilience to these occurrences. Access to federal financial and technical assistance programs remains a significant barrier to the adoption of on-farm conservation practices.

For young farmers, it seems, the debate is not over whether or not climate change exists, but how to deal with it on their farms. The debate for policymakers should be how to give young farmers the tools they need to achieve climate resiliency.



CAN THEY MAKE IT? PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS

Despite the student debt crisis, a changing climate, and a 49% decline in U.S. farm incomes since 2013,[43] young farmers are optimistic about the future. Sixty-three percent of respondents said that they are making or will eventually make sufficient income in farming to meet their life goals.



Derek Emadi, Emadi Acres, TX

FARMING IS TOUGH.
WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO KEEP GOING?

"Farming isn't just a job or a hobby, it is a way of life. It's the life I want to raise my children in and hopefully my grandchildren. I want to leave a legacy."

"It is work I truly love and am passionate about. Food connects to so many important issues of our time: poverty, racism, sovereignty. I think it has the potential to connect people and build better communities. Farmers are generally good people and fun to work for."

"My motivation to continue farming is: my family. It is the way I was raised, and the way that I want to raise my own family."

"I love working on a farm. It gives me a great sense of purpose and brings me close to nature. It's hard work with little pay and can be especially discouraging with the current political climate, but at least I love going to work every day. I know I am personally enriching my life and the lives of others with what I do on the farm."

"The feeling of a sore back and weak knees, knowing I'm making a difference by feeding people in an honest way. Being a second-generation immigrant, first-generation college student, second-generation farmer, and female."

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE YOUNG FARMER AGENDA

Based on the results of this survey and NYFC's work over the last seven years, we have assembled the following federal and state policy change recommendations. Given the scale and immediacy of young farmer needs, we encourage lawmakers, advocates, and citizens to move quickly on these opportunities for reform.

LAND ACCESS

FEDERAL

Increase & prioritize funding for working farm easements through the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), through its Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) funding, helps eligible entities purchase the development rights on farmland by matching up to 50% of the cost of an easement. For more than two decades, this program has been critical to protecting our nation's farmland from development. Mandatory funding for ACEP must be increased in the upcoming farm bill, and fully funded in the annual appropriations process.

In addition, all ACEP-ALE funding should be prioritized for easement projects that incorporate affordability provisions and ensure that protected farmland stays in the hands of working farmers. This will help to fulfill its program purpose of protecting agricultural use and future viability of eligible land, along with the related conservation values.[44] Traditional conservation easements funded through ACEP prevent future development and subdivision on conserved land, but stronger easements are needed to keep this land in agricultural production. In 2013, NYFC reported that nearly 25% of agricultural land trusts had seen land go fallow or be underutilized because it was not held by a working farmer.[45] Once farmland leaves production, it no longer contributes to food growth or agricultural economic development, undermining the intent of federal dollars spent to protect it.

Working farm easements with affordability provisions, such as the Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV), protect the long-term affordability of land and keep it in the hands of working farmers. Given the limits of public funding for farmland protection and the scale of the issue of farmland access and affordability for the next generation of producers, we must ensure that farmland protected with federal funding remains in production and that it will provide rural economic opportunity for working farmers and ranchers for generations to come.

Lastly, in order to ensure that ACEP continues to serve the needs of our nation's current and future farmers, ACEP must allow qualified land trusts to receive funding directly while they hold

44. Farm viability was added to the program purpose in the 2014 Farm Bill as a result of advocacy of NYFC and other partners. The Agricultural Act of 2014 included as a program purpose for ALE: to "protect the agricultural use and future viability, and related conservation values, of eligible land by limiting nonagricultural uses of that land."

land that will be sold to a beginning farmer. Eligible entities should be given the flexibility to use ACEP-ALE funding for projects that combine conservation benefits with pathways to ownership and secure access for farmers to achieve the program purpose.

Increase funding for Farm Service Agency (FSA) Direct Farm Ownership loans and raise the loan limit

FSA loans are critical for young and beginning farmers and are often the only credit option available to them. In recent years as the farm economy has declined, however, farmer demand for loans has caused many programs to run out of available funds only partway through the fiscal year. This demand will likely continue to increase until commodity prices and median farm incomes rebound. Congress should increase funding for loan authority across all FSA loan programs to ensure that they keep pace with demand and meet statutory participation targets for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers.

In addition to adequate funding, the Direct Farm Ownership Loan limit should be increased to meet the realities of farm real estate prices. Current statute limits these loans to $300,000, making them insufficient for many farmers in areas of high real estate prices and volatility, and unable to keep pace with real estate inflation. Overall, farmland real estate values have increased by more than 40% since the cap was last adjusted in 2008. Although Direct Farm Ownership Loans have met their statutory participation rates of 75% for beginning farmers in recent years, they are the only loan program at FSA that has not exhausted its funding, and for which the average loan is the highest relative to its cap. There are undoubtedly a number of reasons this program has not spent down its full funding, including a lack of landowners putting farmland on the market and the competition from buyers with private financing, but the high average loan indicates that the cap is also an impediment that can easily be solved. NYFC recommends adequately funding this program, increasing the loan limit in the next farm bill to $500,000 and pegging it to farmland inflation rates thereafter, and leaving all other loan limits in place to ensure the effectiveness and availability of these funds for beginning farmers.

Improve the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) to increase program participation

Through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), landowners can enter into contracts with USDA and receive rental payments to temporarily remove farmland from production and conserve soil and water resources. CRP-TIP provides retired or retiring landowners with two additional annual rental payments on land enrolled in expiring CRP contracts, on the condition that they sell or rent this land to a beginning, socially disadvantaged, or veteran farmer or rancher who agrees to use sustainable practices. In effect, CRP-TIP creates a pathway for these farmers to access land. It also provides additional income to retired or retiring producers. Congress should assist USDA in developing a better system for matching program participants and provide more direct technical assistance to farmers entering the program to help start production on land previously enrolled in CRP.

Remove barriers to farmland transfer in the tax code

As America's aging farm population prepares to retire, the federal tax code poses significant impediments to the selling of farmland from one generation to the next, risking the loss of hundreds of millions of productive acres. The current capital gains tax—which applies to capital gains of all farmland sold, regardless of whether the land will remain in agriculture or not—leads many retiring farmers to choose to allow the farm to pass through their estate upon death, where capital gains taxes would not apply, and where the land becomes much less likely to remain in agriculture. Creating a capital gains exclusion for farm owners who sell farmland to qualified young, beginning, socially disadvantaged, and/or veteran farmers would create opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers, reduce the tax burden on retiring farmers, and preserve a critical component of rural economies.

Use tax credits to incentivize generational transfer

In addition to removing barriers, Congress should explore positive incentives for land transition through the federal tax code, such as income tax credits for the sale and lease of farmland and assets to beginning farmers, as some states have now done.

Support transition assistance for exiting farmers

Transitioning land owned by an established farm is complex and takes time. Congress should explore funding and incentivizing critical transition assistance—such as legal services, mediation, and financial consulting—offered by farm service providers and extension offices.

STATE

Fully fund state programs that purchase agricultural easements

State and local farmland protection programs provide a foundation of permanently protected land for future agricultural pursuits. While this land may not be immediately accessible to young and beginning farmers and ranchers, without this pool of protected farmland, opportunities for aspiring farmers and ranchers would be extremely limited. Many of these programs are not meeting demand, however, and increased funding is critical to ensure land is protected for future generations of farmers. In addition, states should adopt incentives that encourage local and municipal farmland protection programs, such as authorizing municipalities to levy local real estate transfer taxes for conservation; set aside funding for monitoring and stewardship of easements; and create new funding sources for state programs that provide more stability for farmers and land trusts, like that of a dedicated tax rather than annual budget appropriations. State programs should also consider partnership with municipalities to develop foodshed conservation models that prioritize funding for projects that secure food production around urban centers by protecting affordability, farmer ownership, and water resources.

Include an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) in all state agricultural easement programs and adopt supporting legislation

State farmland conservation programs should ensure that farmland remains affordable to the next generation and stays in agricultural production by incorporating affordability mechanisms, such as Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) provisions, as an addition to easements purchased with state and local funds. This mechanism gives states the option to purchase and resell, or assign the sale of, farm property under conservation easement to a qualified farmer at the land's agricultural use value if it is not being sold to one or transferred to a family member. In addition to prioritizing funding for easements that include affordability mechanisms, states should adopt supporting legislation that allows land trusts to implement and enforce these easements. State programs to purchase agricultural easements can also use funds to work with farmers to retroactively purchase OPAV provisions on targeted parcels that have already been protected and are at high risk for sales to non-farmer owners.

Ensure that state agricultural easement programs address the needs of young farmers and ranchers

As of 2016, only 28 states had a state program designed to fund farmland conservation and few of these programs have a specific focus on addressing the needs of young farmers and ranchers.[46] In addition to prioritizing the preservation of farmland affordability, we recommend states develop new agricultural easement purchasing programs or special offerings within existing programs that are designed specifically for young and beginning farmers. State agricultural easement programs could, for example, allow the purchase of easements on properties that have, or may have in the future, a long-term agricultural ground lease with split ownership between the land and infrastructure. In addition, states can facilitate buy-protect-sell and other projects that combine farmland protection and pathways to ownership for farmers.

State funding for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements is typically restricted to properties that are in active agriculture. To strengthen this provision for young farmers, states can also restrict easement purchases from non-farming landowners to those who have long-term written leases with farmer tenants. In addition, states should evaluate protecting smaller properties, creating future subdivision flexibility, and incorporating housing into farmland protection projects to address the challenge of accessing affordable housing along with land to farm.

Provide state tax incentives to lease or sell land to young farmers and ranchers

Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, and Minnesota have created tax credits for farm and landowners who rent[47] to next generation farmers—including farmland, machinery or equipment, breeding livestock, and buildings. NYFC recommends all states explore and adopt their own tax incentives. In addition, we recommend linking the tax credit value to property taxes paid by the landowner on the land subject to the lease, rather than on rental payments in order to avoid inflation of rents, as well as requiring landowners to have a long-term, secure lease with farmers to receive tax incentives.

Minnesota now also provides a tax credit to offset the costs of attending business and financial management courses for beginning farmers. If enacted in other states, this type of reform would help make young farmers across the U.S. more competitive in the marketplace, while helping to improve access to training.

Create a capital gains tax exclusion for sales to qualified beginning farmers

State capital gains tax is an average of 5% on top of the current federal rate of 20%. Similar to the federal level, excluding capital gains taxes on sales of farmland to qualified young, beginning, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers unless and until the land falls out of active agricultural use would create opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers, reduce the tax burden on retiring farmers, and preserve a critical component of rural economies.

47. In 2017, Minnesota became the first state to provide a tax credit for sales of agricultural assets, in addition to renting.

Support policies that address partition of heirs property

Heir property refers to land that has been passed down without a will and is owned by multiple individuals—sometimes dozens. Heir property is the primary cause of involuntary land loss for African-Americans.[48] This issue also affects landowners in the Native American, Hispanic, and rural white Appalachian communities. Heir property issues can prevent farmers from accessing loans, grants, and government assistance. In addition, a single landowner can force the sale of the property, resulting in unstable land tenure and inability for farmers to securely make infrastructure investments. Supporting state policies that provide due process protections in the case of the sale of properties owned by multiple heirs can help ensure all parties receive fair proceeds and can help build in time to the transaction for mediation and negotiation.

Support state initiatives to facilitate access to state-owned farmland by beginning farmers

In many states, multiple agencies own land that is underutilized and has food-growing potential. States should inventory their landholdings, assess parcels suitable for agricultural production, and establish programs to lease or sell this land to beginning, socially disadvantaged, and/or veteran farmers.

Strengthen current use tax policies to provide security and incentivize farmland remaining in the hands of farmers

Current use programs provide tax incentives for keeping land in agriculture. These programs can be leveraged to better serve the needs of young and beginning farmers and increase tenure security for farmers leasing land by focusing on income—rather than acreage—limits to determine agricultural use; by requiring multi-year written leases for non-farming landowners accessing the program; and other measures, such as utilizing recapture penalties to fund farmland conservation.[49]

Matt Linehan, Sparrow Arc Farm, NY

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

FEDERAL

Add farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program

Just as the federal government has provided incentives for young Americans to enter careers in medicine, education, and other forms of public service, we must encourage young people to choose careers in agriculture. During the 115th Congress, Representatives Joe Courtney (D-CT), Glenn 'GT' Thompson (R-PA), and John Faso (R-NY) introduced the bipartisan Young Farmer Success Act (H.R. 1060) to add eligible farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program. As a part of this program, farmers who make 10 years of on-time, income-based payments on their loans would have the balance of their federal student loan debt cancelled.[50]

Create a restructured loan forgiveness/repayment program for beginning farmers and ranchers in the U.S. Department of Agriculture

In order to encourage individuals to enter into and continue long-term careers in agriculture, Congress should authorize a program at USDA to help qualified beginning farmers and ranchers manage their student debt. The purpose of the new program would be to recruit and retain new farmers and ranchers, thus creating rural jobs by allowing recent graduates to refinance their student loan debt with preferential interest rates and to receive partial loan forgiveness in exchange for farming full time.

Establish a federal-state student loan repayment program for young farmers

New York has started to address this critical barrier facing its young farmers by creating a loan repayment program. A number of states are considering similar initiatives. These programs can help make farming a more viable option for young people, incentivize young entrepreneurs to stay in their home states, and help attract new, young residents to the state. Congress and USDA should establish a federal match program for states that create and administer farmer student loan repayment programs. This would give states flexibility to administer their own programs specific to the needs of farmers in their state and motivate more states to create similar initiatives.

STATE

Establish a state-level student loan forgiveness program

To encourage more students and young people to stay and pursue agricultural careers in-state, and to help local colleges and universities attract more rural students, states should offer student loan forgiveness. Under these programs, eligible graduates would begin repaying their student loans as they enter their farming careers, and the state would forgive or repay an amount of their student loans each year of satisfactory agricultural employment.

LABOR & TRAINING

FEDERAL

Expand support for training opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is the only federal program exclusively dedicated to training the next generation of farmers and ranchers. BFRDP provides competitive grants to nonprofits and universities to develop new farmer education, extension, outreach, and training initiatives. It is directed at helping new farmers and ranchers, and is one of the most successful national programs to date helping to grow the next generation of farmers. BFRDP funding has been used to develop incubator farm programs, provide business planning and food safety training services, promote innovative farm and ranch transfer strategies, and to establish on-farm apprenticeship opportunities to train future farmers and farm workers. BFRDP was first authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, though it did not receive any funding. The 2008 Farm Bill authorized $19 million per year in direct mandatory funding, and it currently receives $20 million per year through the end of the 2014 Farm Bill. When Congress failed to pass a farm bill in 2012, the program did not receive any funds in 2013. To avoid such shortfalls and uncertainty in the future, and to meet the urgent national need for more young, skilled farmers and ranchers, NYFC supports increasing mandatory baseline funding to $50 million per year.

We also recommend eliminating the match requirement for BFRDP grant awardees, to ensure that all organizations and service providers can best train the next generation, particularly in areas of high need and low resources.

Repair our nation's immigration system

As our nation invests in training the next generation of young farmers and ranchers, it remains clear that immigrants are critically important to agriculture in the United States. Current estimates indicate that over three-quarters of farm workers in the U.S. are foreign born, and about half are undocumented.[51] In short, although immigrant farmers and ranchers may not be as visible, they are the majority of the agricultural workforce, and are vital to our agricultural economy, our food system, and the fabric of the communities in which they work. Congress and the President must reject an enforcement-only approach that prioritizes deportation of undocumented families and communities of color. They must fix our immigration system with a comprehensive reform package that provides a legal pathway to citizenship for those who are undocumented and reforms guest worker programs to protect the rights of all workers.

STATE

Develop effective guidelines for farm apprenticeships

On-farm apprenticeships give people with little to no experience in agriculture the opportunity to learn the ropes on a working farm, while also assisting with the farm's labor challenges. State labor laws govern apprenticeships, and some state laws are friendlier to the practice than others. States should define apprenticeships, legalizing them for farmers while ensuring a safe work environment and fair compensation for farm apprentices.

Invest in farmer training programs

Student demand for agricultural training is growing and colleges, universities, and technical schools around the country are rising to meet that demand. States should continue to support, invest in, and incentivize innovative farmer training programs that will increase the skilled workforce and create new agricultural jobs and businesses.

LEGALIZE APPRENTICESHIPS & INVEST IN FARMER TRAINING

HEALTH CARE

FEDERAL

Preserve and improve the Affordable Care Act

Given the strong positive impact the ACA has had on young farmers, it should be maintained. At the same time, Congress should take steps to ensure stability in the marketplace, encourage insurers to participate in exchanges, and make insurance markets more competitive in rural areas.

STATE

Expand Medicaid in all states

To date, 19 states have not expanded Medicaid. Whether this is due to ideology or out of concern that federal funding is unsustainable and will eventually be rolled back, unwillingness to expand Medicaid has deprived young farmers of an important pathway to coverage. All states should expand Medicaid.

HOUSING

FEDERAL

Preserve USDA rural housing programs through Rural Development

Rural Development provides critical investments to address housing, infrastructure, and economic development needs in struggling rural communities. The Rural Housing Service, in particular, provides low-cost loans, grants, and other forms of assistance to improve the availability and quality of rural housing. Farmers can also access affordable financing to expand and improve on-farm housing for farm workers through the Farm Labor Housing Program.

Funding and administration for these Rural Development services should be maintained.

STATE

Establish loan programs for farm worker housing

Providing farm owners with low- or no-cost loans to improve housing conditions and expand housing capacity for farm workers can help states maintain their agricultural workforce, help farmers attract skilled labor, and provide affordable and safe housing for farm workers. New York State's Farm worker Housing Program, for example, partners with local lending institutions to provide qualifying farmers with low-interest loans to rehabilitate, improve, or construct housing for year-round or seasonal farm workers. Over $21 million has been disbursed to farmers since the program's inception in 1995.[52]

BUSINESS PLANNING

FEDERAL

Establish tax free savings accounts

Farms are high-risk enterprises, and even profitable farm businesses often face cash flow challenges during periods of unpredictability. In addition to expanding opportunities for young farmers to access credit and risk management assistance, Congress should work to create special savings accounts for farmers that incentivize year-to-year financial management and foresight by allowing for tax-free withdrawals on farm-related purchases. Such accounts would create a low-cost safety net for farmers to manage risk and invest in the future. For many farmers, even a small cushion can make a big difference in a difficult year. We recommend that farmers have an option similar to a Health Savings Account, where they could save up to a specified amount on an annual basis. We encourage Congress to make such a program also available to farm workers, as a means to save for future farms.

Reauthorize and fund Individual Development Accounts

Individual development accounts (IDAs) can help young and beginning farmers save money by matching funds that they put into a savings account and help them become successful entrepreneurs by requiring business planning and financial management courses. IDA programs have been instrumental in helping young people start businesses in states including Michigan, Iowa, and California. The 2008 and 2014 Farm Bills authorized a matched savings program for beginning farmers, but Congress has never funded the program.

Expand FSA borrower training

Because land acquisition costs have such a significant impact on a farm's business model and financial outlook, FSA should include a module on farmland acquisition and farmland succession planning as part of its required borrower training for FSA Direct Farm Ownership Loans.

STATE

Establish a financial training tax credit for beginning farmers

As educational institutions, business incubators, and nonprofit organizations respond to the demand among young farmers for business and financial training, states can support access to these programs through tax incentives. Minnesota, for example, has enacted a law that will offer a tax credit equal to the cost of the course for qualified beginning farmers who enroll in a financial training program.

YOUNG FARMERS OPERATE ON

THIN MARGINS

BUSINESS PLANNING

CAN MAKE A **BIG DIFFERENCE**

DELIVERING FEDERAL PROGRAMS

IMPROVE IN-PERSON OUTREACH & EDUCATION

Hire, or designate within existing staff, specially trained agents within each of USDA's county and state offices to work with young and beginning farmers

Just as respondents cite unfamiliarity with federal programs as a significant barrier in this survey, NYFC also routinely receives reports from young and beginning farmers that local USDA staff don't know about or inform them of beginning farmer initiatives within USDA. These staff should assist young and beginning farmers with technical assistance, help identify resources and opportunities for training, and help coordinate outreach efforts with local stakeholders and service providers. In 2015, USDA began hiring a small number of beginning farmer coordinators on a regional basis to begin this important work. These efforts should be expanded to every state.

Take steps to train every USDA agent and representative on needs and opportunities for young and beginning farmers and give them flexibility to make loan, grant, and cost-share requirements work for those farmers

Young farmers, like other young entrepreneurs, are innovative and open to trying alternative methods for growing food and marketing it to their communities. USDA must ensure that its officers are empowered to work with and understand these younger growers and work to make every local, county, or state office a one-stop shop for programs specifically designed to benefit new farmers.

Continue to improve USDA recruitment and oversight of staff in the field

Federal programs and policies that support historically underserved producers are critical, but outcomes for farmers are often determined at the local level by USDA field staff. A farmer's experience and level of success accessing programs can change dramatically depending on which county he or she farms in, and the USDA personnel on the ground. Training all staff to better understand and serve young farmers, farmers of color, and indigenous farmers is an important step, but not the only one. Recruiting and hiring field staff who themselves represent the increasing diversity of the U.S. farm population will improve USDA's outreach, education, and customer service for all farmers.

MODERNIZE DELIVERY OF SERVICES

Move USDA loan application and servicing systems online

For many young farmers today, use of technology and the internet are second nature. They order seed and stock online, pay vendors with apps, track sales and expenses using programs like Quickbooks, market their products on social media, and implement automated irrigation systems. Too many USDA services, however, remain out of reach or out of touch for millennial farmers and must be modernized to keep pace with new customers and the rapidly changing industry. The current process requires farmers to turn in application forms in person, which can compound the time and expense required of farmers, particularly in rural areas. Creating a full-service online portal would give FSA staff more flexibility to work directly with farmers and put FSA on track to attract the customers of the future.

For older and low-resource farmers, and until broadband has reached every rural county in the U.S., USDA must, of course, maintain critical in-person and on-paper services. In many cases, and for many functions, USDA staff in the field are irreplaceable, and we should ensure they have the resources to continue their work and build long-term relationships in the communities they serve, particularly as they strive to reach historically underserved farmers. As NYFC itself learned, hosting this survey exclusively online made it available to many, but may have prevented some farmers—particularly those from vulnerable populations—from taking it. For some communities, particularly farmers of color and migrant farm workers, strengthening relationships on the ground is critical. Ultimately, however, as potential budget challenges could contract USDA's own personnel capacity, the agency must begin modernizing its services. Doing so would help serve the 40% of respondents who said that the paperwork was too burdensome, and it would bring USDA's customer service closer in line with the private sector.

Streamline the application process by creating a system for farmers to pre-qualify for loans

In competitive real estate markets, the FSA loan-making process often takes too long for growers to purchase land. Non-farmers with pre-approved mortgages and cash bids can easily outbid working farmers for farmland. The current application process can take longer than 30 days and funds may not be available for months. To address this barrier, the agency should streamline the application process by creating a system for farmers to conditionally pre-qualify for loans.

GO SMALL

Create a "micro" version of every USDA program possible

The success of FSA's microloan program offers a valuable lesson: reaching young farmers doesn't always require creating new programs, but instead scaling down existing ones. Some of the biggest barriers revealed in our survey—unfamiliarity, burdensome paperwork, not enough time to apply—are also the most solvable. USDA should continue exploring ways to streamline applications, reduce paperwork, and adjust oversight requirements to be scale-appropriate for beginning farmers, many of whom start their careers operating small-acreage farms.

Just as it created the microloan program, USDA should create a "micro" version of every program possible.

SEE THE BIG PICTURE

Assess how federal farm programs relate to one another

USDA and Congress should assess how federal farm programs relate to one another, and how farmers use these services, particularly now that USDA is reexamining its core functions and undergoing significant restructuring.

As our survey indicates, young farmers are predisposed toward sustainability and stewardship, and many of them are feeding their immediate communities. To support young farmers and their businesses, in other words, is to improve conservation outcomes, promote rural economic development and repopulation, and keep farmland in production.

Given the urgency of the challenges our farm economy and our natural resources face, we encourage leaders at USDA and Members of Congress to think across agencies and beyond discrete program purposes and statutory mandates. Young farmers are changing U.S. agriculture. How can federal programs change with them?

Miriam Goler, Full Circus Farm, NY

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

FEDERAL

Fully fund voluntary USDA conservation programs

USDA conservation programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) help farmers and ranchers manage natural resources and improve environmental benefits while also enhancing farm viability. EQIP and CSP provide payments and hands-on help for farmers and ranchers who implement practices that conserve natural resources such as planting cover crops or creating wildlife habitat. EQIP can also help reduce the cost of equipment or infrastructure such as irrigation equipment, fencing, and livestock watering facilities, while promoting farm viability in the process. Funding through targeted programs such as the EQIP High Tunnel System Initiative has helped young farmers extend their growing seasons, access new markets, and utilize EQIP for the first time.

Despite their proven benefits, conservation programs experienced significant cuts in the 2014 Farm Bill, and many continue to be targeted for reductions in the annual appropriations process. Cutting funding for conservation programs makes it harder for smaller family farm operations to compete for available funding and leaves farmers vulnerable to climate change, drought, and other natural resource challenges, and, over the long term, increases the need for federal intervention and mitigation. NYFC believes that these programs yield a significant return on their investment and that funding for these programs should be increased.

Expand existing EQIP benefits for beginning farmers and ranchers

Recent farm bills include special participation incentives for beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) in EQIP and other conservation programs. USDA is required to set aside 5% of total EQIP funding for BFRs. To keep up with demand, however, Congress should raise the reservation rate for BFRs to 15%. In addition to the funding set-aside, BFRs should remain eligible for higher EQIP rates than other farmers and receive advance payments to begin implementing conservation practices.

Establish a national pilot program to ensure small farm access to EQIP funds

Under EQIP, small-scale farmers, which include many young farmers, are often at a competitive disadvantage with larger operations for program funds and NRCS staff resources. To improve parity and equity for these farmers, Congress should establish a pilot small acreage EQIP initiative to help ensure that EQIP funds are more cost-effective and equitably administered to small acreage operations. Funding for the program should be set aside through existing EQIP funds. The pilot program should further streamline the EQIP application process to reduce the paperwork required for small operations and set aside technical assistance funds to help small-scale farmers develop conservation plans and apply for EQIP funding.

Promote climate resilient agriculture practices through EQIP initiatives

EQIP initiatives are designed to address particular challenges and promote targeted conservation practices. Building healthy soil through cover cropping and other conservation practices can help improve farm productivity, while also promoting carbon sequestration, flood resistance, and drought tolerance. Congress should direct USDA to establish a new EQIP initiative to accelerate implementation of core conservation practices that help agricultural producers build healthy soils, promote on-farm water stewardship, and enhance both farm viability and resilience to the impacts of climatic variability and extreme weather events.

Renew the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to promote public-private partnerships in conservation projects

RCPP fosters the creation of partnerships between farm and conservation organizations, states, and federal agencies to help farmers tackle priority natural resource concerns on a regional scale. These partnerships help leverage significant private dollars to further conservation objectives. Several RCPP projects have recognized the importance of beginning farmers to conservation outcomes and have been designed specifically to help BFRs succeed. Congress should reauthorize this important program, include farmland transition to and participation of BFRs in the program's purpose and funding priorities, increase funding for state-level RCPP projects, and expand the funding reservation from covered programs to leverage these partnerships even further.

Expand conservation education and outreach initiatives

Many aspiring farmers entering the field today did not come from agricultural backgrounds and are, therefore, often not aware of the USDA programs and resources available to support them. Simultaneously, reductions in USDA staff have limited the ability of state and county offices to adequately market available USDA programs to new farmers and ranchers. NYFC supports a dedicated funding stream within the Conservation Title of the farm bill to advance conservation adoption and outreach to beginning farmers and ranchers. Funding should be made available to local service providers such as soil and water conservation districts and cooperative extension service offices to hire staff that assist BFRs in applying for USDA conservation programs. Funding through the set-aside could also be used to develop additional online resources for BFRs and expand the existing network of USDA-BFR regional outreach staff.

Reauthorize the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program outreach initiatives

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant program has been helping fund farmer-driven, sustainable agriculture research for over 25 years and remains the only USDA competitive grants research program that focuses solely on sustainable agriculture. SARE grants directly fund farmers who want to explore sustainable solutions through on-farm scientific research, demonstration, and education projects. SARE grants have helped develop regional water quality trading markets that effectively improve water quality through market-driven, voluntary efforts; supported efforts to expand markets for organic crops; increased economic viability; and provided farmers and ranchers with timely information concerning adaptation measures to drought and other natural disasters.

STATE

Provide financial assistance to promote voluntary, on-farm conservation practices

Several states provide financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to support voluntary, on-farm conservation efforts such as building healthy soil, which provides multiple public benefits. Maryland provides low-interest loans to help farmers install best management practices on their farms, purchase conservation equipment, and adopt new technologies that help protect natural resources and enhance water quality.

RACIAL EQUITY

FEDERAL

Increase funding for programs that help historically underserved farmers and ranchers gain access to land and government services

Historically underserved farmers and ranchers have faced disproportionate rates of land loss and discrimination. Programs that address these challenges must remain adequately funded and implemented effectively for the communities they are designed to serve. Examples include:

• Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Grant Program (known as 2501), which funds organizations specifically working to address the resource needs of historically underserved communities, including heir property land transition;

• The Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan Program, which addresses issues of land ownership fractionation in Native American communities by providing a way for tribes and tribal members to obtain loans to purchase fractionated interests through intermediary lenders;

• The Indian Tribal Land Acquisition Loan Program, through which USDA extends credit to Indian Tribes or Tribal corporations that do not qualify for standard commercial loans to purchase land within their reservation, and assist with legal and closing costs associated with land purchase;[53]

• The Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program, which provides competitive grants to tribal extension programs that enhance tribal farming and ranching operations.

All of these critical programs have been underfunded relative to the nature and scale of the challenges they address, and mandatory funding should be significantly increased.

Add focus on first-time landowners and increase coordination

After generations of systemic dispossession and loss of farmland among farmers of color and indigenous farmers, the interfamily transfer of farmland between generations is often no longer possible. To help repair this broken link, Congress should create focus areas within federal funding for conservation and education initiatives that address the needs of first-time landowners—similar to programs for first-time homeowners—and ensure these programs meet the needs of farmers and organizations utilizing cooperative ownership models, which have been an important tool for many communities of color and indigenous communities. USDA should also expand and strengthen its StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative, and generally increase coordination across agencies, to enable communities to tackle the complex and interrelated issues of rural economic opportunity, land access, and farm viability, particularly in areas of persistent poverty.

Require collection and public release of demographic data for all programs

As USDA continues to acknowledge and address historic and current racial disparities in federal farm programs, Congress should improve its oversight of these programs by requiring the collection of demographic data across all programs and making it public, as some programs already do. The collection and release of this data—including applicants, awardees, and decision-makers—would allow for proper evaluation of program implementation and outcomes.

STATE

Establish positions within state agencies to promote inclusion of socially disadvantaged farmers in agricultural programs and policies

Although federal initiatives exist to improve access for and outreach to socially disadvantaged farmers—including the 2501 Program and the USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach—many states do not have their own programs. States should enact laws, like California's Farmer Equity Act, that recognize the structural and systemic inequities for farmers of color and indigenous farmers, designate staff within state agencies to address them, and promote inclusion and representation of socially disadvantaged farmers across all agricultural programs and policies.

Allow access to driver's licenses for undocumented farm workers

The Department of Labor has found that a majority of undocumented farm workers have been U.S. residents for more than a decade.[54] Despite being skilled farmers and valued members of their communities, those who lack legal status are unable to carry out even the most basic day-to-day tasks, like grocery shopping and visits to the doctor. This practical and social isolation is compounded in rural areas, and the lack of mobility can leave undocumented farm workers more vulnerable to labor abuse. As 13 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico have already done, states should permit all residents to acquire driver's licenses, regardless of legal status.

THE CHALLENGES YOUNG FARMERS FACE ARE NOT EXPERIENCED EQUALLY

CONCLUSION

Some aspects of farming are steadfast. To make a living from the land will always require risk and determination; it will reward entrepreneurship and creativity and will remain a physically demanding and emotionally consuming endeavor. Young farmers today embody those virtues, and they seek to continue the legacy of generations past. Our 2017 survey results indicate, however, that young farmers today are doing things differently. They are operating smaller farms and growing more diverse crops. They are capitalizing on demand for local food by selling directly to their customers, and they are overwhelmingly committed to sustainable and conservation-minded farming practices. Our survey results indicate that they're highly educated, increasingly racially diverse, and, despite significant barriers and relatively low income, they are optimistic about the future.

The portrait of young farmers illustrated in our survey may seem like an atypical or nontraditional one, at least compared to modern, large-scale agriculture. A look at the broader generation these young farmers come from, though, suggests that they reflect many of the qualities of their non-farming peers. Millennials are the most highly educated and diverse generation yet.[55] Despite economic headwinds unprecedented in the modern era, millennials are optimistic—with eight in ten saying they make enough money to lead the lives they want or expect to in the future. They are also more likely than other generations to believe that climate change is a significant threat to our future and are more likely to prioritize sustainability. As this new and unique generation of farmers steps up to replace the retiring one, the nation's farm economy and support structure must change with them.

NYFC was founded to support the young people who are defying the odds and starting careers in agriculture and to recruit the many more of them that our nation and food system need. Ultimately, we believe that the only way to win back young people to the farm is to show them that farming is a career worth pursuing, and that it can support one through all phases of life. If we help these new farmers make it, more will follow.

Ensuring the success of our nation's newest farmers and ranchers and those who aspire to join them will require deliberate policy change at all levels of government. Those changes have been a primary focus of this report, and for NYFC as a farmer-led organization. To preserve farming as a livelihood and to revitalize our nation's agricultural economy, though, will require more than a whole-of-government approach. It demands a deliberate effort from every stakeholder—individuals, communities, and businesses—to ensure the success of young farmers.

HELP GROW YOUR LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY

Young farmers are finding opportunities from the increased demand for local food, selling directly to customers in their communities. Becoming a CSA member, shopping or volunteering at your farmers market, and prioritizing local food will help expand opportunities for new growers and put more food dollars back into their farms and the community. These market channels also allow young farmers to build relationships with customers and other farmers, both of which provide important resources for feedback and development.

RENT OR SELL FARMLAND TO YOUNG AND BEGINNING FARMERS

Every farmer dreams of passing his or her land on to the next generation—whether within the family or without—and NYFC works with policymakers, land trusts, and other organizations to help facilitate land transfer. But not every landowner is a farmer, and not every young producer knows a retiring farmer. Non-operator landlords (those who are not actively involved in farming) own eighty percent of rented farmland and 30% of all farmland in the U.S.[56] Landowners with arable land, whether it's a pasture near the suburbs or a second home in the country, can provide opportunities for young farmers to get their start by making their land available for agriculture.

BRING YOUR BUSINESS TO THE TABLE

From restaurants and food service to textiles and retailers, food and agriculture contribute nearly $1 trillion to the U.S. economy.[57] For every business that relies on raw products that farmers grow, there is another that relies on farmers as customers: seed and feed companies, irrigation manufacturers, tractor dealers, vets, and mechanics. The success or failure of our nation to replace its aging farmers will impact every part of the economy, and policy reform alone cannot solve the current crisis. We need the private sector to step up. Businesses big and small should look to create training and mentorship opportunities, help provide pathways to credit, protect farmland for beginning farmers, source food from young, local farmers, and partner with organizations like NYFC to sound the alarm and bring these policies to Washington, D.C., and state capitals across the country.

JOIN NYFC

The more farmers and supporters who join NYFC, the more power our coalition has to make our policy platform a reality. Please join NYFC today to add your voice to our movement. The future of agriculture depends on it!

NYFC members Casey Holland and Ronald Williams, Jr., at a D.C. Farmer Fly-In, June 2017

ENDNOTES

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