



Ohio's Agricultural Easement Purchase Program: From pilot to permanent presence A survey of AEPP participants

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Survey Summary

“Ohio’s Agricultural Easement Purchase Program: From Pilot to Permanent Presence” is a survey commissioned by the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA) to gauge satisfaction and explore improvements with the Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP), as well understand the impact of funds dispersed. The survey was conducted in the summer and fall of 2009 by the Ohio State University’s Center for Farmland Policy Innovation. The following are selected highlights from the survey:

- Response rate was very high. Of the 101 participants that were surveyed, 79 responded, translating to a response rate of 78.2%.
- Corn and soybean growers dominate AEPP. Ninety-two percent of respondents reported growing corn and 82% grow soybeans, rates over double the state averages.
- AEPP participant farm operations are larger. The average AEPP participant’s entire farm operation is larger than the state average, 662 acres and 184 acres respectively.
- AEPP participants are generally more active farmers. 70.5% reporting that more than half the household income comes from farming (26.5% reporting that *all* their household income is from farming).
- Preserving farmland and preventing development were listed as the main reason for respondents participating in AEPP. These reasons mirror the goals of AEPP. Financial interests, came in a distant second.
- Regarding AEPP’s ability to assist communities in preserving Ohio’s farmland (which is a stated program goal), 70% of respondents agree that AEPP achieves this goal.
- AEPP participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with the program. A combined 91.7% of respondents stated they are satisfied with the program.
- Most common calls for improvement of AEPP were to speed up the process and to make the application less confusing. Part of the frustration over the delay in easement process could be associated with the matching of the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program to AEPP funds, which has been known to slow down the process.
- Improved communication between participants and AEPP is desired. While not cited frequently as a way to improve the program, another question indicates that landowners would like improved levels communications with ODA about their easements. Given the program design, ODA is not the primary communicant (the local sponsor is), and therefore would need to work with the local sponsor to improve communication.
- Funds participants receive for participating in AEPP are mostly used for investments and saving. Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported using the funds for investments and savings where approximately 10.3 million dollars, or 52%, of reported funds were expended. Within this category, buying more land was the single largest expenditure at 16% of the total funds recorded, or \$3.3 million.
- Paying off household debts is the single largest sub-category for funds expended, accounting for 32% of the funds or approximately \$6.4 million.
- Securing a loan after placing an easement on the farm does not impact the process. Twenty-nine respondents reported applying for a loan after the easement was placed on their property. Only two respondents reported that the easement negatively impacted their loan experience.

- AEPP has a big, and positive, impact on conservation measures. Over half of the respondents indicated that since receiving AEPP funds, they already have and/or are planning to establish new conservation practices on their farms.
- AEPP expands the farm business. Twenty-three respondents have and/or are planning to diversify. Seventeen respondents have and/or are planning to establish new or additional farm businesses.
- ODA and the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board can make program improvements by addressing issues raised in the survey (in particular, selection and easement process issues) and further building on successes (both business and conservation oriented impacts) documented in this survey. The AEPP technical advisory group may also provide assistance, particularly as strategies relate to local sponsors.
- Utilize this benchmark. ODA's Office of Farmland Preservation now has a benchmark for AEPP. It would be most useful to conduct regular surveys every few years with not only previous applicants, but new entrants and new owners.

1.0 Introduction

As the Ohio Department of Agriculture's (ODA) Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program began to transition from the initial pilot program to a permanent place in Ohio's conservation options, ODA wanted to look back over the seven years the program has operated to understand two key issues. First, given the transition, this was an opportune time to reexamine the program from a participant's perspective. By understanding the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of participants and related issues, ODA could make adjustments in the future. Second, ODA wanted to know the impact of funds provided to farm families for placing agricultural easements on their property.

To accomplish these goals, ODA partnered with Ohio State University's Center for Farmland Policy Innovation (Center) to conduct an AEPP participant survey. During the summer and fall of 2009, the Center worked with ODA to identify participants and develop a survey that reflected ODA's program goals.

1.1 The Agricultural Easement Purchase Program

The Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP) pays farmland owners to voluntarily place an agricultural easement upon their farm with the express goal of preserving Ohio's farmland for future generations. An agricultural easement is a deed restriction that prohibits any future non-agricultural development. The easement allows for agricultural development and the land itself stays under private ownership. Currently the AEPP is funded at \$6.25 million [Kristen?] per year. More information about ODA's AEPP can be found at the Office of Farmland Preservation's website: <http://www.agri.ohio.gov/farmland>.

2.0 Survey Methods

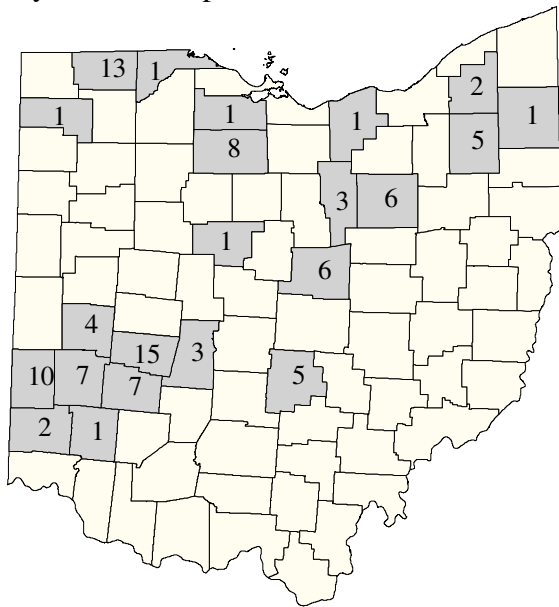
The survey was developed by the Center in consultation with ODA. The overall survey design was guided by ODA's objectives outlined in Section 1.0. Further, similar surveys were collected from across the country. The survey question topics included: easement funds use; farm

management changes as a result of program participation; future farm plans; motivations for program participation; perceptions of easement success; and overall program satisfaction. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument. Finally, a review panel of land protection professionals tested the survey instrument.

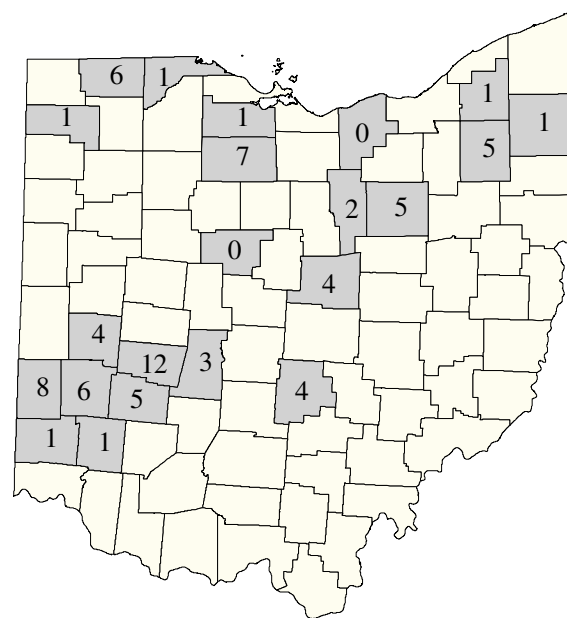
All AEPP participants from the program’s inception in 2002 to the latest round (2007) were surveyed. A pre-notification letter was sent to each AEPP participant explaining the objectives of the survey, their rights as a voluntary participant and the timing of when the survey would be arriving at their home. The survey was then sent one week later to AEPP participants. For those not returning the survey within 3-4 weeks, a follow-up letter was sent as with a duplicate survey. Finally, phone calls were made to participants who did not send in the survey after the follow-up letter was sent. Additional surveys were sent out to those needing new copies. Note: Filling out of this survey was voluntary and all responses are kept confidential.

3.0 Results

Of the 104 AEPP participants, three farms were no longer owned by the original participants. We did not survey the current owner because we were most interested in why the original participant applied to AEPP, what the experience was like for the participant, and how they utilized the funds they received. Of the 101 participants that were surveyed, 79 responded, translating to a response rate of 78.2%, which is considered a very good response rate for this type of survey. Of the 79 respondents, two were sent back blank and one had so few responses that it was not included in the analysis. Therefore 76 responses total were included in the analysis. See Maps 1 for and 2 – farms that cross borders are counted in both counties.



Map 1. Surveys Sent by County



Map 2. Survey Respondents by County

Both 2004 and 2007 had the lowest response rates, at 67% each. One possible reason for the low response rate in 2007 could be due to the fact that some farms had not completed the easement

process at the time of the survey and therefore many of the questions did not apply to these participants. No other discernable patterns were found for non-respondents.

3.1 Respondent Demographics

AEPP is a very competitive program, funding only 7.3% (using just numbers from 2002-2007, 117 funded 1,603 applicants) of applications are successful. Therefore, it is important to gain a sense of who is able to enter in to this program. In this subsection we review some basic demographics of respondents and compare these demographics to the average farm operation in Ohio. In 2007, statewide, 32% of farms harvested corn and 31% of farms harvested soybeans. However, 92% of respondents reported growing corn and 82% growing soybeans. Of the respondents, 49 (of 59) or 84% of respondents get most of their farm income from corn or soy (see Table 1).

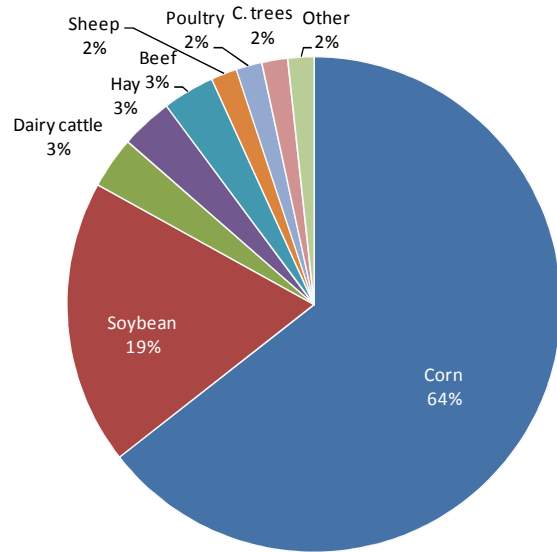


Figure 1. Product providing the most gross farm income (N=59)

Product	#
Corn	38
Soybean	11
Dairy cattle	2
Hay	2
Beef	2
Sheep	1
Poultry	1
Christmas trees	1
Other	1

AEPP participants, on average, have larger farms at 622 acres (N= 72; range 38.5-2080; median 300) than the average Ohio farmer of 184 acres.

AEPP participants are generally active farmers, with 70.5% reporting that more than half of the household income comes from farming (26.5% reporting that all their income is from farming) (see Figure 2.) In Ohio, 40% of farmers report that farming is their primary occupation. While these two data points are not directly comparable, they do suggest that AEPP

Table 1. Product providing the most gross farm income (N=59)

is attracting active farmers.

The average age of the principle operator in Ohio is 55.7 years old; while the average age of the AEPP participants is 65.6 years old (range of 36-94).

The structure of the average Ohio farm business is somewhat similar to AEPP participants. Eighty-three percent of AEPP

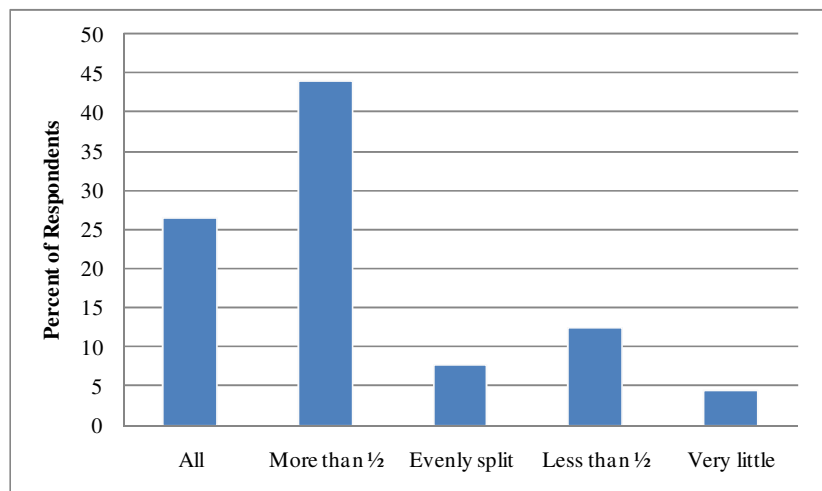


Figure 2. Proportion of household income is from farming

participants compared to 87.5% of Ohio farms are family or individually owned. Although 11 people responded that the business structure was in a family (8) or non-family (4) corporation. Only 3.9% of Ohio farms overall are corporations.

3.2 Motivation

What motivated participants to apply and enter into the Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program? Do participants and program managers have the same goals? We asked three open-ended questions related to motivation for participating. The first was “Why did you participate in the AEPP?” We then read all the responses and developed common categories. Responses could qualify for more than one category. Table 2 details these categories (N=56).

Compiled Categories	#	%
Preserve farmland for farming/future generations	37	66
Prevent development/sprawl	24	43
Generate income	14	25
Additional farm purchases	6	11
Show support of AEPP	2	4

Table 2. Motivation for participating in AEPP, compiled categories

The following quotes taken from surveys illustrate some of the general themes found above (see Appendix B for all responses to open-ended questions):

“I believe that a significant amount of our rural land should not be developed and the AEPP is one of the best ways to protect that land.”

“To secure the income and my belief in the program.”

“The major part of this farm has been in the family since 1868, the rest was added in 1958. This was a very good way of paying off debt and setting the farm up as one block so it could not be divided and sold as parcel. The possibility of this farm ground to be carried on to the fifth, sixth generation is likely.”

The responses to another motivation question were similar to the previous question. Table 3 shows the compiled responses to the question, “What does the AEPP mean to you, your family, and your farm?” Again, a respondent may qualify for more than one category.

Compiled Categories	#	%
Preserve/save our land to stay agricultural	38	68
Eliminates development/sprawl	11	20
Financial security	8	14
Ability to enhance agricultural and conservation practices	7	13
Other	7	13

Table 3. The meaning of AEPP to the participant (N=56)

The following are selected quotes that reflect the most popular responses (see Appendix B for all responses).

“The AEPP has allowed us to feel more secure about our future. As I like to say the proceeds we received has taken the “edge off” of farming. We were able to reduce our debt by 50% and have been able to improve our property.”

“The future plan for the farm is now well defined, which enables decisions now being made, to enhance the long term goals of improving the farmland, in terms of conservation practices and fertility.”

“It means we can continue to farm this farm without taking out additional loans to expand our operation. It has changed how we view this place and how we will farm it.”

The “Other” category includes: the ability to educate others on the importance of farming; the freedom to do alternative farming practices; the added value to surrounding property; and, the capability of maintaining the farm’s beauty.

These responses show that the participant’s goals are in-line with the overall goal of the program of permanent farmland preservation. The primary goal of land protection far outweighs financial motivation. Further, these responses demonstrate that the AEPP program provides the opportunity to enhance agricultural and conservation practices. Finally, these responses are very similar to findings of studies of participants in similar programs in Massachusetts, New York, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania¹.

Finally, we asked respondents to tell us what would happen to their farm if AEPP were not an option. This question was asked without a set timeframe. Seventy-three percent said they would continue to farm and 27% suggested they would have sold off pieces of the farm, rented it out, sold the farm to a developer or used the land for other purposes.

3.3 Satisfaction with AEPP

As AEPP transitions from a pilot program to a permanent program, this is an opportune time to remedy any aspects of the program that are consistently rated as problems and build on any commonly identified strengths.

We simply started by asking how satisfied the participant is with AEPP. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with 91.7% responding that they are satisfied with the program. Three respondents, or 4.2%, gave a neutral response with an equal amount saying they were dissatisfied. This question was on a 7-point scale, with “1” being not satisfied at all, “4” being neutral, and “7” qualifying as very satisfied (see Table 4 and Figure 3). There is a slight

¹ Rilla, Ellen and Alvin D. Sokolow. 2000. “California farmers and conservation easements: Motivations, experiences, and perceptions in three counties.” University of California Agricultural Issues Center. California Farmland & Open Space Policy Series. Research Paper #4

correlation with year the participant entered into the program and satisfaction level, with those entering in earlier years being more satisfied than later years.

Results indicate that Ohio agricultural easement purchase program participants have higher satisfaction levels than in the California three-county study cited earlier, and a similar study conducted in Vermont².

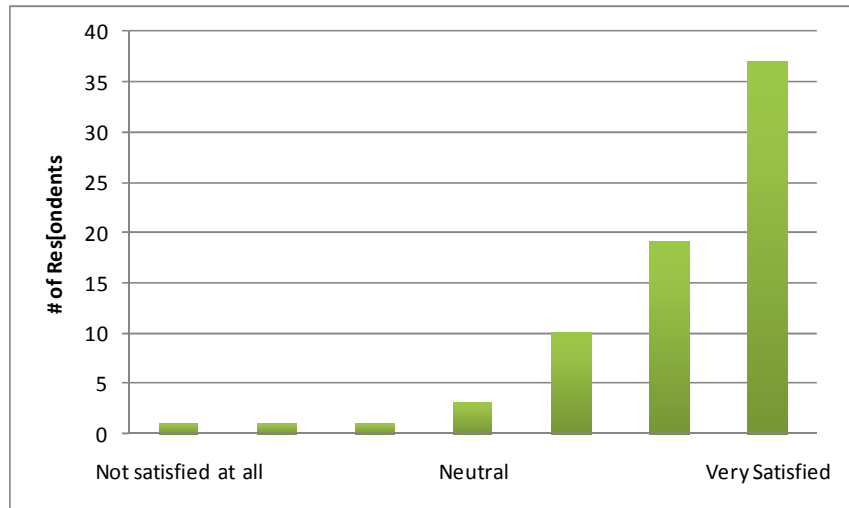


Figure 3. Participants level of satisfaction with AEPP (N=72)

Level of Satisfaction	#
1, Not satisfied at all	1
2	1
3	1
4, Neutral	3
5	10
6	19
7, Very satisfied	37

Table 4. Participants level of satisfaction with AEPP (N=72)

was that the easement process was too slow. Five of the seven respondents that indicated the easement process was too long that ODA had purchased easements that were jointly funded with AEPP funds and the federal funds from the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. It is thought that the use of these funds slows the AEPP easement process.

In addition to asking participants to rate their level of satisfaction, the survey requested that respondents detail in an open-ended question what changes would they recommend to improve AEPP. Even though satisfaction ranked high, thirty-six people provided ideas on how AEPP could be improved. Their responses were compiled into categories (full responses found in Appendix B). The most common response (Table 5)

Changes need to improve AEPP*	#
Speed up the easement process	7
Make the application less confusing	6
Make AEPP program larger	4
Improve communication	4
Eliminate/change tier 2	3
Change/update income tax codes	2
Increase money given to landowner	2
Other	7

* A respondent may have responded in more than one category

Table 5. Participants suggested changes to improve AEPP (N=36)

Other suggestions to improve AEPP included providing more help to landowners with selling easements, giving priority to family farms, enabling non-land trust sponsors to be more competitive (compared to land trust sponsors), promoting donation of easements because of tax benefits, expanding support for local land trust entities, and focusing on crops over wildlife.

Because a few respondents were not satisfied, it is important to look specifically at those responses. The three dissatisfied respondent answers are located below.

² Sherman, Robin L., Suzanne Milshaw, Robert C. Wagner and Julia Freedgood. 1998. "Investing the future of agriculture. The Massachusetts farmland protection program and permanence syndrome." American Farmland Trust Report.

“1. Do away with Tier II, 2. Draw names out of a hat, 3. Disperse and close funds same year of acceptance, no matter what!”

“The amount of the easement payment that must go back to ODA to just be considered for the program and the percentage requested by local sponsors in order to continue the oversight of the program. Obviously the changes I would recommend is to increase the amount actually passed on to the land owner.”

“Have better communication between departments, get the facts and do what you say in a timely way.”

The three respondents that were “neutral” did not provide any written answers addressing how the program could be improved. However, two of the three did provide comments in the open comment portion, Section 10. Here are their comments:

“I believe in this program and want it to continue for the future of Ag. Some of these questions are tough to answer on paper. It’s a good program but more money would be nice for what you have to give up.”

“I think estate planning is simpler. Family can’t fight over whether to plot it out or what I really don’t think it value is much less because of the easement. You know what the old farmers used to say their not making any more farmland my guess is in the end it wont make any difference. Please forgive my lack of neatness and comp. It’s a busy time of yr.”

Some suggestions on how to improve the program can be addressed by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, such as communication, ease of application and the selection process. Some suggestions, however, are outside the purview of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, such as changing income tax codes or increasing the overall funding structure of the Clean Ohio program (which provides funds for AEPP).

Communication w/ODA	#	%
1 - Not satisfied at all	1	1%
2	2	3%
3	4	6%
4 - Neutral	11	15%
5	11	15%
6	12	17%
7 - Very satisfied	31	43%

Table 6. Satisfaction of level of communication with ODA (N=72)

One question specifically asked about the respondents’ satisfaction with the level of communication about the easement with ODA

(Table 6). Seventy-five percent of respondents are satisfied with the level of communication with ODA. Fifteen percent of respondents provided neutral responses and 10% indicated they were not satisfied. Note: Because of the program design, the local sponsor, who applied on behalf of the landowner, is the primary communicant with the landowner.

On a related note, but mainly outside of ODA’s purview, we asked how participants perceived the ability of AEPP’s ability to meet the following in their county:

“One of the goals of the Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program is to assist landowners and communities in preserving Ohio’s farmland. Farmland protection activities not only ensure that the scenic views and heritage of Ohio’s countryside are maintained for future generations, but they also benefit our environment and provide critical habitat for local wildlife populations.”

As Table 7 illustrates, 70% believe AEPP has been able to assist their county in meeting this goal. Only five respondents or 8.3% believe that AEPP has not assisted their county in moving towards the above stated goal.

Level of success	#
1 – Not successful at all	1
2	0
3	4
4 – Neutral	13
5	13
6	21
7 – Very successful	8

The survey then asked for an explanation to the participant’s response in an open-ended question (See Appendix B for all responses). The responded that considers AEPP to be “not successful at all” in assisting their county in achieving the above stated goal provided the following explanation:

Table 7. Perceived level of success of AEPP in meeting county’s goals (N=60)

“1. Our county is mostly lopsided in easement acres. Too much contiguous is becoming unsightly. 2. ODA/AEPP changes the rules too much.”

The following are response is from those respondents rating this question as a “3,” or slightly unsuccessful:

“The first year of the program many in our county applied to AEPP. Most of the applicant were disappointed that their farms were not accepted and have not reapplied. We have tried to encourage some of the applicants to reapply but they seem to be no longer interested in the program.”

Finally, the following is a sample of a response from those that believe AEPP is assisting their county to meet farmland preservation goals:

“Has protected real family farms and helped the economies of XX County. This program is the only form of economic development that has occurred in our county recently.”

3.4 Impact of Program: Use of AEPP Funds

In addition to permanently protecting farmland, the AEPP provides compensation for this protection. To understand the impact of the program beyond land protection, the survey included a section for participants to record how they used the funds received through the program. It is important to point out that the AEPP program has been successful in garnering federal funds. So the total funds made available reflect both AEPP funds and the USDA Federal Farm and Ranchland Program funds that Ohio has received for purchasing easements. With the 76% response rate, we are able to account for \$19,928,532, over two-thirds of the total \$28,834,721

expended. Note: At the time of this survey, much of the \$2.5 million in 2007 funds were not transferred to participants, therefore, many of these participants would have nothing to report. Five participants from the 2007 round did not respond, which accounts for about \$1 million in program funds.

The survey simply asked “How did you use the funds you received from AEPP?” The respondent was asked to provide the percent of the funds expended in given categories. If the respondent expended funds that did not fit these categories, the survey format provided an “other” category.

Table 8 and Figure 4 shows the categories collapsed into four major categories. The table details how many respondents reported spending in that category and how much was spent. Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported using the funds for investments and savings. In this category 52% of funds, or \$10.3 million dollars were expended. These results suggest that an overwhelming number of participants are investing in their operations. For example, one respondent described how his family had lived off-farm before enrolling in the program, but the funds allowed them to build a house on the farm. Other respondents used the funds to purchase more land. And another owner is using his funds to expand a 35 acre stand of hardwood trees into a 100 acre forest. A further 35% of the funds, or \$7.0 million, could also be considered as reinvested in the operation because participants used this to pay down debt. The other category included such categories as education, travel/recreation/vacation, conservation practices, and charitable donations.

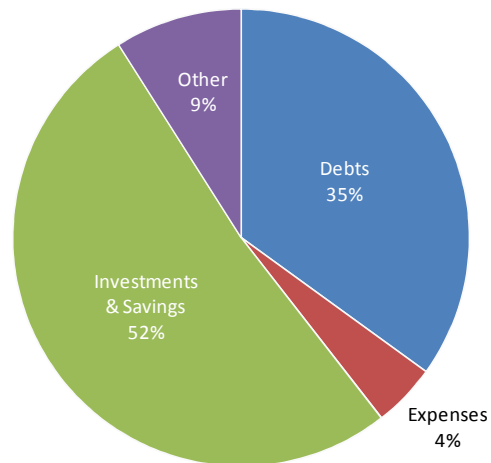


Figure 4. How AEPP funds were spent (N=71)

Activity	% of Respondents Reporting Activity	Percent of Funds Expended in this Category
Debts	63%	35% (7.0 million)
Expenses	20%	5% (0.9 million)
Investments & Savings	77%	52% (10.3 million)
Other	27%	9% (1.8 million)

Table 8. How AEPP funds were spent (N=71)

Table 9, below, provides a more detailed break-down of the categories. The total amount spent and percentage of funds and the frequency (or number of those who expended funds in this way) and the percent of respondents are included. Paying off household debts is the single largest category for funds expended, accounting for 32% of the funds. Within investments and savings, \$6.4 million is used for expanding and improving the farm. Buying more land is the largest expenditure at 16% of total funds. One respondent wrote “After being in the AEPP program, I have donated to the easement another 80 acres, have bought another 78 acres next to the AEPP

farm and put my farm in a trust.” Funds used for non-farm purposes accounted for 9% of the funds.

Categories	Total spent	% of funds	# of respondents	% of respondents
<i>Debts</i>	\$6,973,475	35%	45	63%
paying off debts	\$6,445,639	32%	42	59%
income tax payment	\$527,836	3%	8	11%
<i>Expenses</i>	\$912,643	5%	14	20%
reinvesting in daily farm expenses	\$884,990	4%	14	20%
Hiring employees	\$27,654	0%	1	1%
<i>Investment & Savings</i>	\$10,281,195	52%	55	77%
buying more land	\$3,272,276	16%	13	18%
repairing or expanding buildings	\$1,632,205	8%	24	34%
buying more equipment	\$879,540	4%	17	24%
new farm buildings	\$543,710	3%	9	13%
new mngr or retail practices	\$84,993	0%	3	4%
general savings or investment	\$2,598,867	13%	25	35%
Trusts for children	\$328,255	2%	3	4%
retirement funds	\$941,349	5%	5	7%
<i>Other</i>	\$1,761,218	9%	19	27%
education	\$60,010	0%	2	3%
Travel/recreation/vacation	\$118,957	1%	3	4%
conservation practices	\$876,072	4%	12	17%
Other	\$706,179	4%	8	11%
<i>Total</i>	\$19,928,532	100%	71	100%

Table 9. How AEPP funds were spent, detailed categories

Early in the development of AEPP, there was debate over whether or not participating in the program would affect the ability of participants to secure a loan. A question in the survey asked if participants applied for a loan since they entered into AEPP. Twenty-nine, or 41%, responded that they did apply for a loan. If participants applied for a loan, we asked if AEPP had an impact on getting that loan (Table 10). Only 2 respondents said that they had a somewhat negative impact. Eighteen responded that there was no impact of AEPP on the loan experience. Thirteen respondents said they had a positive experience.

Experience	#	%
very positive	4	13.8
somewhat positive	8	27.6
no impact	15	51.7
somewhat negative	2	6.9
very negative	0	0.0

Table 10. Loan securing experience post-AEPP (N=29)

3.5 Impact of Program: AEPP and Farm Management – Past Changes and Future Plans

Given that participating farms are permanently protected, it is expected that other long-term farm oriented changes may occur as a result of AEPP. Four questions were asked of AEPP participants in regards to changes in farm management practices as a result of AEPP. The following table (Table 11 and Figure 5) shows the responses to each question for both past activities (left side) and plans for the future (right side). The biggest impact of AEPP on farm management

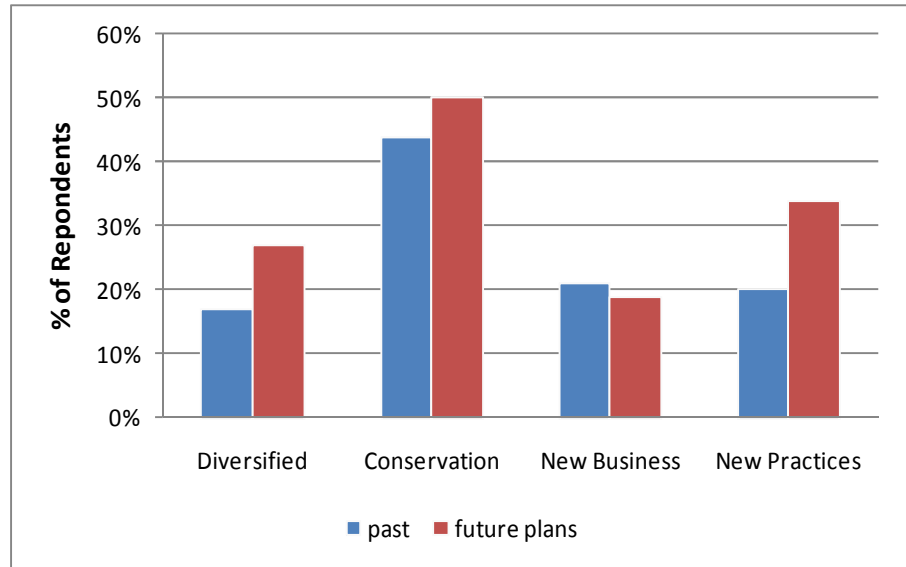


Figure 5. AEPP and Farm Management – Recent Changes and Future Plans

practices appears to be related to new conservation practices. Forty-four percent respondents (or 31 total) stated that they established new conservation practices on the farm as a result of AEPP. Fifty-percent of respondents (or 35 total) stated that they plan on establishing new conservation practices in the future. The impact of AEPP on on-farm conservation measures is something to note. While not a main goal of the program, AEPP has always focused on conservation practices. From the first AEPP application to today’s application, the selection process rewards applicants for engaging in conservation practices. It is possible that this philosophy, combined with the protection of the farm leads participants to further enhance conservation on the farm.

As a consequent of participating in AEPP....				
	Have you done any of the following?		Do you plan on doing any of the following?	
	% Yes	# responding	% Yes	# responding
Diversified into new crops or different kinds of livestock, or created new products from crops you have already been growing?	17%	(70)	27%	(68)
Established new conservation practices?	44%	(70)	50%	(68)
Established new or additional farm business(es)?	21%	(70)	19%	(67)
Established new farm practices?	20%	(69)	34%	(67)

Table 11. AEPP and Farm Management – Recent Changes and Future Plans

Table 12 and Figure 6 illustrate the same data in a different way. This table shows how many respondents are engaging in new management strategies both in the past and the future, in addition to those that have just started new strategies in the past or just planning on doing these in the future. A total of 37 respondents have already established new conservation practices and/or are planning to in the future as a result of AEPP, while 31 respondents are not changing conservation practices. As a consequence of AEPP, 17 respondents have and/or are planning to establish new or additional farm businesses. For example, one respondent hired a conservation planner to help implement a strip tilling program. Another used the funds to construct a wetland area and sod waterways to alleviate erosion issues and facilitate better water management. In addition, twenty-three respondents have and/or are planning to diversify into new crops or livestock or created new products as a result of participating in AEPP.

Farm Management Practices	No past/ No future	No past/ Yes future	Yes past/ No future	Yes past/ Yes future
Diversified into new crops or different kinds of livestock, or created new products from crops you have already been growing?	45	12	5	6
Established new conservation practices?	31	8	3	26
Established new or additional farm business(es)?	50	3	4	10
Established new farm practices?	40	13	3	23

Table 12. AEPP and Farm Management – Recent Changes and Future Plans, Cross-tab

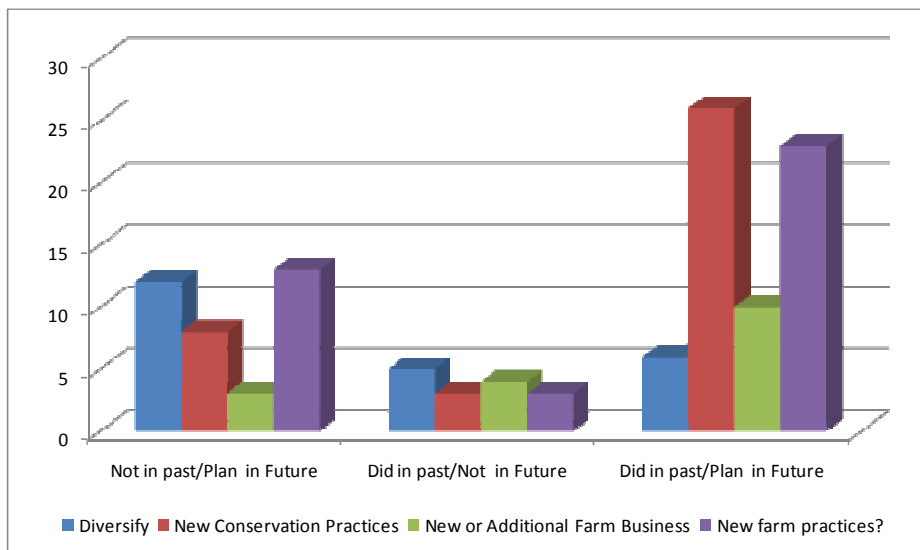


Figure 6. AEPP and Farm Management – Recent Changes and Future Plans, Cross-tab

3.6 Open Comments

The final component of the survey was a full, blank page requesting any additional comments. Twenty-six respondents left comments. See Appendix B for full responses. Of the responses, 11 were provided criticisms/critiques of the program and 15 were positive about the program.

Of the disapproving comments, the general themes are captured by the following two quotes that address the length of time from farm selection to final closing and the process of farm selection:

“The scoring process does not always preserve the best farms.”

“This program is getting a reputation of taking too long to get the money.”

Of the positive comments about the program, the following two quotes summarize the general sentiment:

“This was a good decision on our behalf. It has changed the way we feel about the long term use of this farm.”

“This program saved our family farm- we were hanging on by our finger nails.”

4.0 Conclusions

The survey AEPP participants achieved its primary goals as outlined in the introduction. Further, the survey allowed us to identify ways of improving the program and the impacts the program has had on Ohio farms and in Ohio communities. The important next steps are to further consider what can be done with the survey results. Foremost, the findings can be shared with administration, the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board and the technical committee. ODA and the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board can make program improvements by further building on successes documented in this survey and addressing process issues raised in the survey. The AEPP technical advisory group may also provide assistance, particularly as strategies relate to local sponsors.

Successes to consider building on are the impact of AEPP on increased conservation practices and landowners' focus on farm reinvestment and new business development. Of course, the most evident success is the overwhelming satisfaction of participants with AEPP. Lastly, according to respondents' answers, AEPP is achieving the stated program goals of land protection. Perhaps a question for ODA and the advisory board is whether or not there is a natural way to build on these goals.

The process considerations raised in this survey include common themes that came through several of the question responses. These include farm selection, application ease, length of easement negotiation, and, to a lesser extent, communication. Foremost, the selection process attracts active farmers, which is a positive sign for the continuation of the business. However, farm selection appears to favor larger row crop farms. Given this information, an opportunity exists to revisit what types of farms are in the program, and perhaps more importantly, which types are not. ODA has already been addressing the ease of the application process on an annual basis by meeting with their AEPP technical advisory group, which provides direct advice on

these issues. The length of the easement negotiation process most likely includes working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, which administers the federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, to better coordinate the federal matching dollars. Finally, because of the program design, the local sponsor, who applied on behalf of the landowner, is the primary communicant with the landowner and, therefore, ODA should work with the local sponsors on coordinating communication with landowners. Of course, some issues raised by respondents are simply outside of the purview of ODA, such as changing income tax codes or increasing the overall funding structure of the Clean Ohio program (which provides funds for AEPP).

Opportunities exist for ODA to do more outreach with local leaders about the benefits and positive impacts of this program both with individual landowners and the community as a whole, using this survey as a basis. Additionally, opportunities exist to do outreach regarding successes and impacts with state-level decision-makers who enable AEPP to be conducted.

Finally, ODA's Office of Farmland Preservation now has a benchmark for AEPP. It would be most useful to conduct regular surveys every few years with not only previous applicants, but new entrants and new owners.

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About CFFPI

The Center, established in 2006, resides at Ohio State University, and is associated with the OSU Extension Services. Our mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming. We work to spread local seeds of invention. Further, we work at the state and federal levels to encourage viable local agricultural environments.