



# Non-Operator Landowner Survey



## CALIFORNIA RESULTS

Little data exists on the millions of Americans who own and lease agricultural land but do not farm it themselves—people we call “non-operator landowners” or NOLs. American Farmland Trust’s mission is to protect farmland, promote sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. We cannot meet our mission without engaging this critical group of agricultural landowners. We have also found that NOLs are keenly interested in stewarding their land well, even if they aren’t farming it themselves.

In 2018, AFT began surveying NOLs across the country to increase our knowledge and understanding of how to serve this audience better. This fact sheet presents select survey findings for California. For more information on the survey and our methodology go to [farmland.org/nolssurvey](http://farmland.org/nolssurvey). This survey is a project of AFT’s Women for the Land Initiative. For more information about the WFL program, check out our website [farmland.org/women](http://farmland.org/women).

### SELECT FINDINGS: LANDOWNERS

The landowners who responded to our California survey tend to be:



**senior**

**70**

AVERAGE AGE



with **past experience**  
operating a farm

**59%**

HAVE FARMED

**15%**

HELPED PARENTS FARM



**non-resident**  
on the land they rent out

**69%**



and living  
**elsewhere**

**30 miles**

MEDIAN DISTANCE AWAY



## SELECT FINDINGS: LAND

Generally, the landowners surveyed



**own**  
a median of  
**290**  
ACRES



of which  
they **rent** out  
**199**  
ACRES



use their land primarily for  
**crop** production  
**89%**



have  
owned the land for  
**decades**



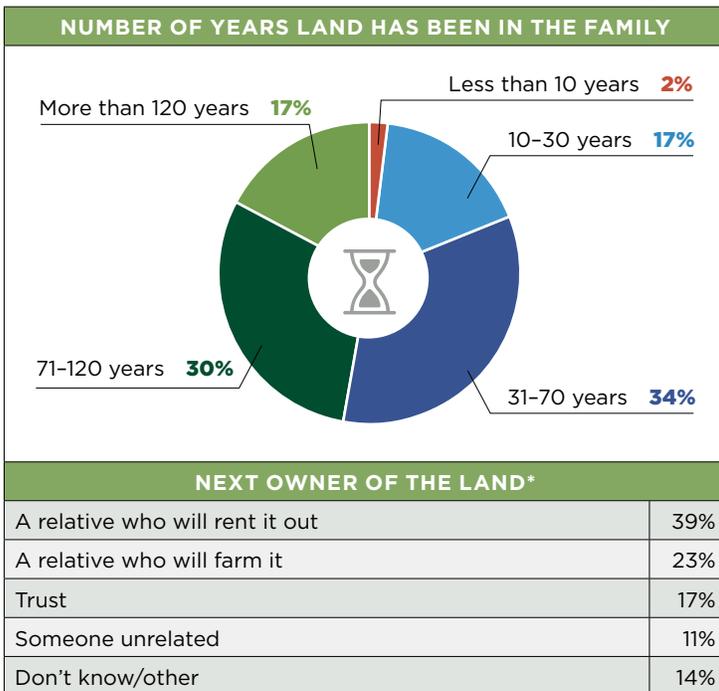
and are likely to  
keep the land in  
**family hands**

**Table 1. Key Landowner Stats**

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE OF FARMLAND TO HOUSEHOLD*	
Immediate income and a primary source of household income	24%
Immediate income but not a primary source of household income	56%
Long-term real estate investment	27%
Estate-planning tool	24%

\* Could select multiple categories, thus results will not equal 100%

**Table 2. Key Land Tenure Stats**



\* Could select multiple categories, thus results will not equal 100%

In California, we surveyed 255 non-operator landowners. We aimed to survey both men and women who own 25 acres of farmland or more. A primary goal of our research is to understand better the differences in the needs of male and female landowners, so we sampled men and women equally. We also eliminated trusts from our sample because of the difficulty of identifying the primary decision-maker to survey, and the inability to differentiate trusts by gender. This undoubtedly affected the results of our survey—one cannot determine the actual gender split in landownership from our data, and readers should keep in mind that we only surveyed individually- or partnership-owned lands, not institutions or trusts.

Landowners most often (42%) rent their land to someone who is not related nor a friend of the family, while 37% rent to neighbors or friends of the family, and 18% rent to a relative or family member. The majority (85%) of lease agreements are written and both cash rent agreements with fixed or flexible payments (44%) and crop share agreements (42%) are common. Additionally, landlords have typically been renting their land to the same operator for a long time, with the median length of time being 12 years, representing long-lasting relationships between landowners and renters.

When evaluating their renter (current or potential), respondents were asked to consider a series of attributes that are somewhat or very important to them. Within the survey, a large number of attributes associated with their renter, including their trustworthiness to their reputation and their conservation philosophy and priorities were included. The six qualities that were most frequently cited as “somewhat” or “very” important appear in Table 3. (See the full list at [farmland.org/nolssurvey](http://farmland.org/nolssurvey).)

For information sources, those responding to our survey trust their farmer first and foremost for information. They are primarily interested in receiving information and/or technical assistance on water quality improvement and soil fertility improvement. (Table 4)



## SELECT FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP WITH FARMER

Generally, the landowners surveyed



lease to someone  
**not family, friend  
or neighbor**

42%



through a  
**written** agreement

85%



**long standing**

12 years

MEDIAN



with a term that's  
**indefinite**

42%



and they overwhelmingly  
**trust** their farmer to make good  
**conservation** decisions

87%

**Table 3. Qualities Most Frequently Cited as “Somewhat Important” or “Very Important” when Evaluating Current or Potential Farm Operators**

MOST IMPORTANT OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS	
Trustworthiness	99%
Reputation as a good farmer	98%
They are financially responsible	98%
Ability to maintain soil productivity	97%
They care about my land	96%
Ability to avoid contaminating waterways (chemicals, nutrients, etc.)	94%

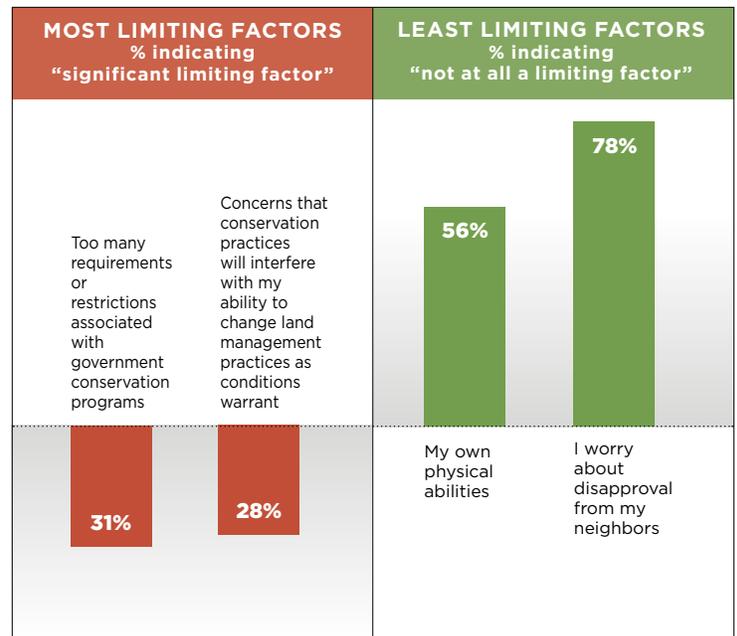
**Table 4. Sources & Needs for Information on Conservation**

MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF CONSERVATION INFORMATION	
My farm operator/lessee	79%
Farm or ranch manager	60%
Local County Soil & Water Conservation Districts (SWCD)	59%
State University Extension	55%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN RECEIVING INFORMATION AND/OR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Water quality improvement	46%
Soil fertility improvement	44%
Soil erosion control	29%
Negotiating farmland leases	26%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN INTERVENTIONS	
Having access to educational materials developed for non-operating landowners like you	26%
Having access to leasing tools that better account for costs, benefits, and timeliness of implementing conservation practices	18%
Belonging to a network if non-operating farmland owners who face similar challenges as you do	15%

California NOLs were asked about 21 potential barriers to conservation that focused on economic (e.g. farm economy, profitability of farm, cost of practice); social (e.g. neighbors, no one else doing it); and knowledge factors (e.g. availability of information, lack of knowledge on my part, lack of knowledge on my farmer's part). (Table 5)

While respondents cited the perception that too many requirements or restrictions are associated with government conservation programs as their biggest barrier, very few worried about disapproval from their neighbors.

**Table 5. Barriers to Conservation on Their Rented Land**





California NOLs were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with 14 statements focused on land management and their lease. (Table 6) All statements that received 50% or more NOLs agreeing are included here. The responses show that the respondents trust their operators and are generally comfortable changing the lease terms to include conservation practices.

**Table 6. Perceptions on Owner-Leaser Relationship**

I trust my operator to make good conservation decisions	87%
I am committed to my operator's continuation as a renter of my land	83%
I am comfortable extending the length of my operator's lease to facilitate implementation of conservation practices on my land	68%
I am comfortable asking my operator to use certain conservation practices on my land	66%
I am comfortable asking my operator to amend or make an addendum to our lease requiring conservation practices	51%
Enough water and soil conservation practices have been implemented on my leased land already.	50%

California NOLs were also provided with 11 statements focused on factors they consider when making land management decisions, and they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with them (Table 7). All statements that received 50% or more NOLs agreeing are included here. The responses show a diversity of considerations are important to the landowner, including economics, the environment, the importance of keeping the land in farming, their farm operator, and local landowners and communities.

**Table 7. Factors Considered when Making Management Decisions (Level of Agreement)**

Need for income from the land	93%
Soil quality	89%
Keeping the land in farming	89%
Needs of the farm operator leasing my land	89%
Water quality	87%
Future generations of my family	80%
The neighboring landowners	69%
Wildlife habitats	63%
The surrounding community(ies)	61%
Endangered species	57%
Biodiversity	50%

**SUPPORT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**CONCLUSION**

These findings and others from the survey can begin to help policy-makers, natural resource agencies, and conservation groups understand how best to work with non-operating landowners to achieve more effective resource management of rented lands. In terms of the most important action items for California, the results suggest:

1. There is a **high level of trust** in the farm operator, and **willingness to make changes** to the lease, which may be an entry point for the operator to discuss with the landowner longer term leases to allow implementation of conservation practices that take longer than a year to pay off economically.
2. The high level of landowner's willingness to make changes to the lease with their farm operator in various ways that incorporate **conservation practices**, combined with the importance of **soil quality** to the landowner is another entry point for beginning conversations about lease changes that benefit both parties.
3. The desire by landowners to **keep the farmland in farming** reveals the symbolic importance of the land, and provides a third entry point for conversations about the beneficial impacts of conservation practices on land for future family generations.

**American Farmland Trust**

For nearly 40 years, the mission of American Farmland Trust has been to protect farmland, promote sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. AFT is a leader in working side-by-side with farmers and landowners to accelerate adoption of conservation practices.

Visit [farmland.org/women](https://farmland.org/women) or contact Gabrielle Roesch-McNally, Women for the Land Director, at [groeschmcnally@farmland.org](mailto:groeschmcnally@farmland.org) or **(360) 631-8489**.

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