



PHOTO COURTESY OF USDA/NRCS

Non-Operator Landowner Survey



INDIANA 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 Indiana. For more information on the survey and our methodology go to 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.

SELECT FINDINGS: LANDOWNERS

The landowners who responded to our Indiana survey tend to be



senior
71
AVERAGE AGE



with **past experience**
operating a farm

40% HAVE FARMED **33%** HELPED PARENTS FARM



in residence
on the land they rent out or living **nearby**

50% **10 miles**
MEDIAN DISTANCE AWAY



SELECT FINDINGS: LAND

Generally, the landowners surveyed



own
a median of
100
ACRES



of which
they **rent** out
70
ACRES



use their land primarily for
crop production
98%



have
owned the land for
decades



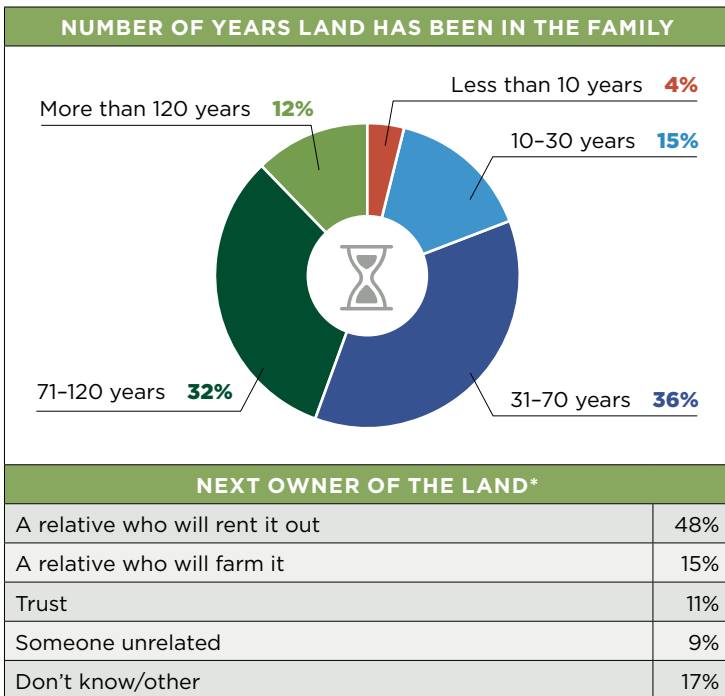
and are likely to
keep the land in
family hands

Table 1. Key Landowner Stats

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE OF FARMLAND TO HOUSEHOLD*	
Immediate income and a primary source of household income	16%
Immediate income but not a primary source of household income	62%
Long-term real estate investment	33%
Estate-planning tool	20%

* 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 Indiana, we surveyed 369 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.

Half (50%) the landowners rent their land to a neighbor or friend of the family, while 29% rent to someone who is not related nor a friend of the family, and the rest (20%) rent to a relative or family member. Interestingly, the majority (68%) of lease agreements are verbal and most are either a crop share agreement (49%) or cash rent agreement with fixed or flex payment (46%). Additionally, landlords have typically been renting their land to the same operator for a long time, with the median length of time being 15 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.)

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 soil fertility improvement and water quality improvement. (Table 4)



SELECT FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP WITH FARMER

Generally, the landowners surveyed

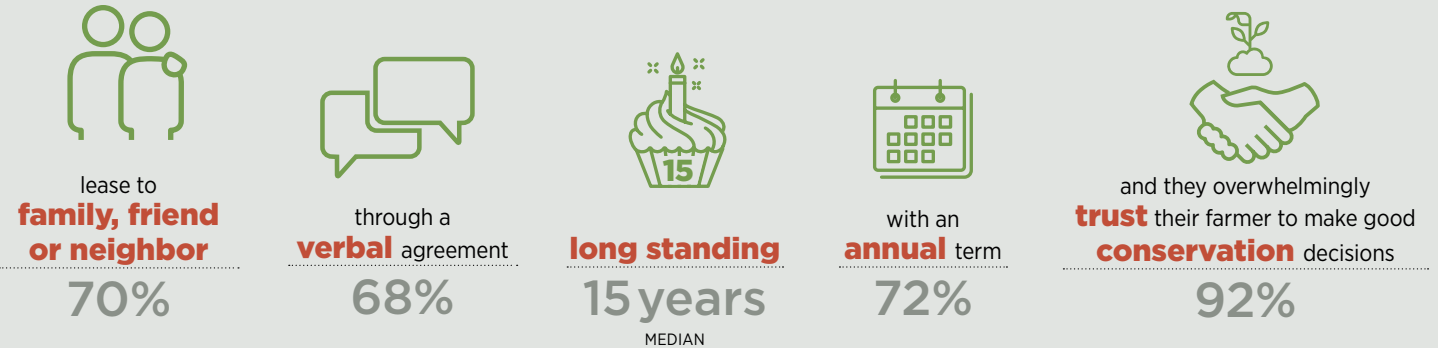


Table 3. Qualities Most Frequently Cited as “Somewhat Important” or “Very Important” when Evaluating Current or Potential Farm Operators

MOST IMPORTANT OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS	
They care about my land	99%
Trustworthiness	98%
Ability to maintain soil productivity	97%
Reputation as a good farmer	97%
Ability to avoid soil erosion	97%
They are financially responsible	96%

Table 4. Sources & Needs for Information on Conservation

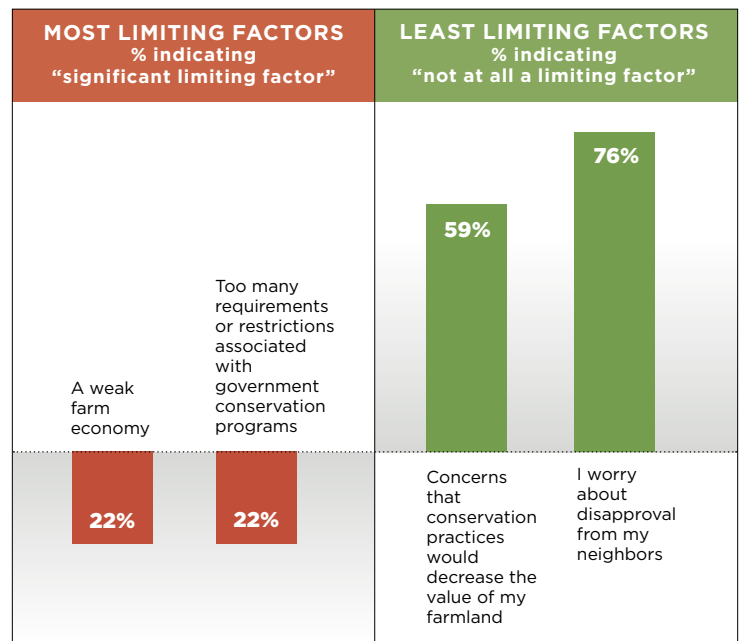
MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF CONSERVATION INFORMATION	
My farm operator/lessee	74%
Local County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD)	54%
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	48%
State Department of Natural Resources	46%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN RECEIVING INFORMATION AND/OR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Soil fertility improvement	41%
Water quality improvement	37%
Soil erosion control	36%
Government conservation programs	30%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN INTERVENTIONS (TOP 3 CHOICES)	
Having access to educational materials developed expressly for non-operating landowners like you	30%
Having access to leasing tools that better account for costs, benefits and timeliness of implementing conservation practices	24%
Working with a government agency in providing conservation services targeted to non-operating landowners	17%

Indiana 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 Indiana landowners in our survey saw a weak farm economy and the number of requirements or restrictions associated with government conservation programs as their biggest barriers, very few worry about disapproval from their neighbors or that conservation practices would decrease the value of their farmland.

Indiana NOLs were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with 14 statements focused on land management and

Table 5. Barriers to Conservation on Their Rented Land





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 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	92%
I am committed to my operator's continuation as a renter of my land	88%
I am comfortable extending the length of my operator's lease to facilitate implementation of conservation practices on my land	81%
I am comfortable asking my operator to use certain conservation practices on my land	76%
I am comfortable asking my operator to amend or make an addendum to our lease requiring conservation practices	58%
I would be willing to include lease provisions relating to specific conservation practices (e.g. grassed waterways, no-till, adaptive nutrient management, cover crops, filter strips and wildlife habitat)	50%

Indiana 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 the environment, economics, their farm operator, the importance of keeping the land in farming, and local landowners and communities.

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

Soil quality	88%
Keeping land in farming	88%
Needs of the farm operator leasing my land	84%
Need for income from the land	83%
Future generations of my family	82%
Water quality	73%
The neighboring landowners	68%
Wildlife habitats	64%
The surrounding community(ies)	56%
Endangered species	50%

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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 Indiana, 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, such as cover crops, 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 or contact Gabrielle Roesch-McNally, Women for the Land Director, at groschmcnally@farmland.org or **(360) 631-8489**.

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