



Non-Operator Landowner Survey



VIRGINIA 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 Virginia. 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 Virginia survey tend to be



senior

71

AVERAGE AGE



with **past experience**
operating a farm

47%

HAVE FARMED

23%

HELPED PARENTS FARM



non-resident
on the land they rent out

53%



but living **nearby**

40 miles

MEDIAN DISTANCE AWAY



SELECT FINDINGS: LAND

Generally, the landowners surveyed



own
a median of
140
ACRES



of which
they **rent** out
81
ACRES



use their land primarily for
crop production
68%



have
owned the land for
decades



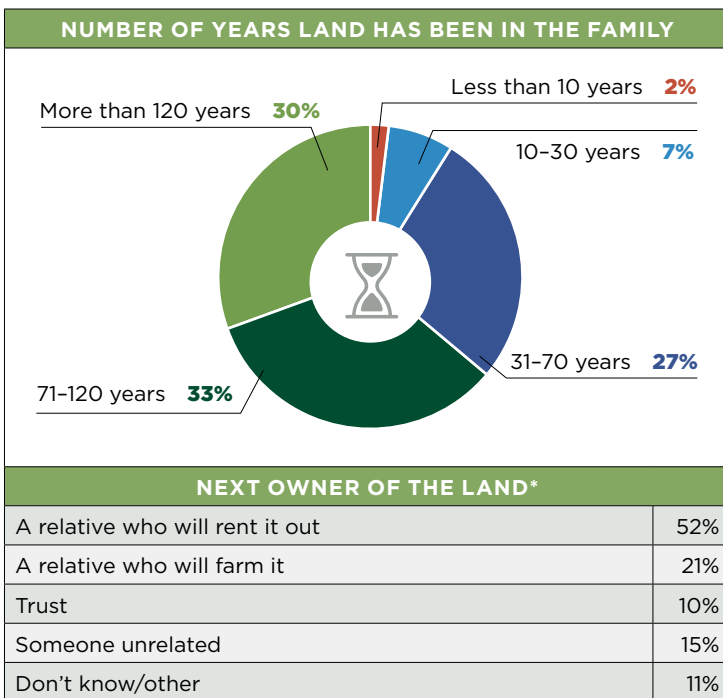
and are likely to
keep the land in
family hands

Table 1. Key Landowner Stats

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE OF FARMLAND TO HOUSEHOLD*	
Immediate income and a primary source of household income	10%
Immediate income but not a primary source of household income	63%
Long-term real estate investment	31%
Estate-planning tool	14%

* 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 Virginia, we surveyed 138 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 (48%) rent their land to neighbors or friends of the family, while 31% rent to someone who is neither related nor a friend of the family, and the rest (21%) rent to a relative or family member. Interestingly, the majority (64%) of lease agreements are verbal and most are a cash rent agreement (67%). Additionally, landlords have typically been renting their land to the same operator for a long time, with the median length of time being 10 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. 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 soil erosion control. (Table 4)



SELECT FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP WITH FARMER

Generally, the landowners surveyed



lease to
**family, friend
or neighbor**

69%



through a
verbal agreement

64%



long standing

10 years

MEDIAN



with an
annual term

45%



and they overwhelmingly
trust their farmer to make good
conservation decisions

89%

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

MOST IMPORTANT OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS	
They are financially responsible	98%
Trustworthiness	97%
They care about my land	96%
Reputation as a good farmer	94%
Ability to maintain soil productivity	92%
That they are a good communicator	92%

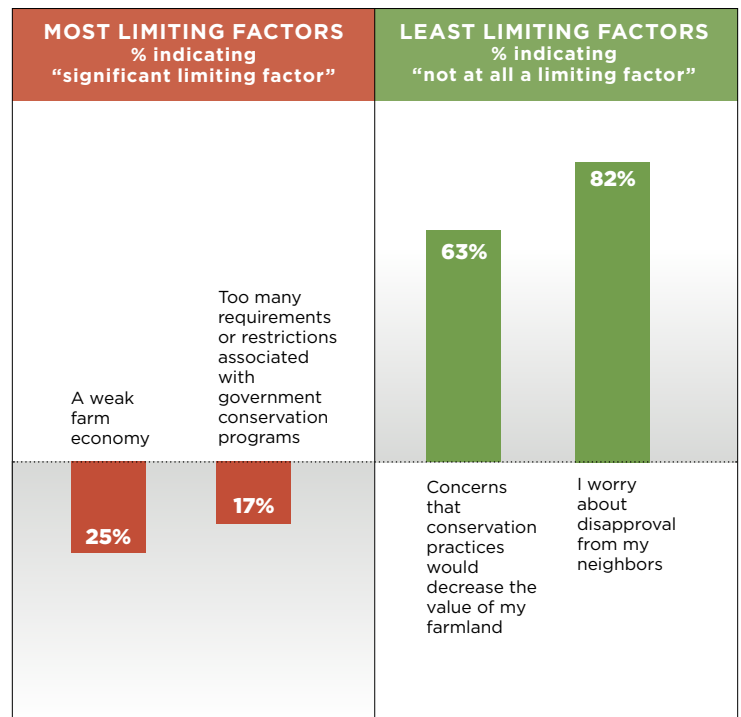
Table 4. Sources & Needs for Information on Conservation

MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF CONSERVATION INFORMATION	
My farm operator/lessee	76%
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	63%
Local County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD)	62%
Farm or ranch manager	58%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN RECEIVING INFORMATION AND/OR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Soil fertility improvement	46%
Soil erosion control	46%
Water quality improvement	43%
Government conservation programs	40%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN INTERVENTIONS (TOP 3 CHOICES)	
Having access to educational materials developed expressly for non-operating landowners like you.	36%
Having access to leasing tools that better account for costs, benefits and timeliness of implementing conservation practices.	32%
Working with a government agency in providing conservation services targeted to non-operating landowners	31%

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

Table 5. Barriers to Conservation on Their Rented Land





Virginia 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 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.	89%
I am committed to my operator's continuation as a renter of my land.	86%
I am comfortable extending the length of my operator's lease to facilitate implementation of conservation practices on my land.	86%
I am comfortable asking my operator to use certain conservation practices on my land.	83%
I am comfortable asking my operator to amend or make an addendum to our lease requiring conservation practices.	75%
I would be willing to include a lease provision that requires my operator to implement soil erosion control practices to conserve/improve soil health.	57%
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)	54%

Virginia 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 their community.

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

Needs of the farm operator leasing my land	89%
Keeping land in farming	88%
Soil quality	85%
Water quality	80%
Need for income from the land	79%
Future generations of my family	78%
Wildlife habitats	76%
The neighboring landowners	75%
The surrounding community(ies)	67%
Endangered species	62%
Biodiversity	58%

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 Virginia, 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. Landowners are willing to extend the length of their operators lease to experiment with **conservation practices** and amend the lease to require conservation practices—and see the importance of **soil quality improvement**, which is an entry point for beginning conversations about lease changes that can lead to more conservation.
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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