



Non-Operator Landowner Survey



WASHINGTON 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 Washington State. 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 Washington survey tend to be



senior

69

AVERAGE AGE



with **past experience**
operating a farm

33%

HAVE FARMED

31%

HELPED PARENTS FARM



not resident
on the land they rent out

80%



and living
far away

152 miles

MEDIAN DISTANCE AWAY



SELECT FINDINGS: LAND

Generally, the landowners surveyed



own
a median of
406
ACRES



of which
they **rent** out
320
ACRES



use their land primarily for
crop production
95%



have
owned the land for
decades



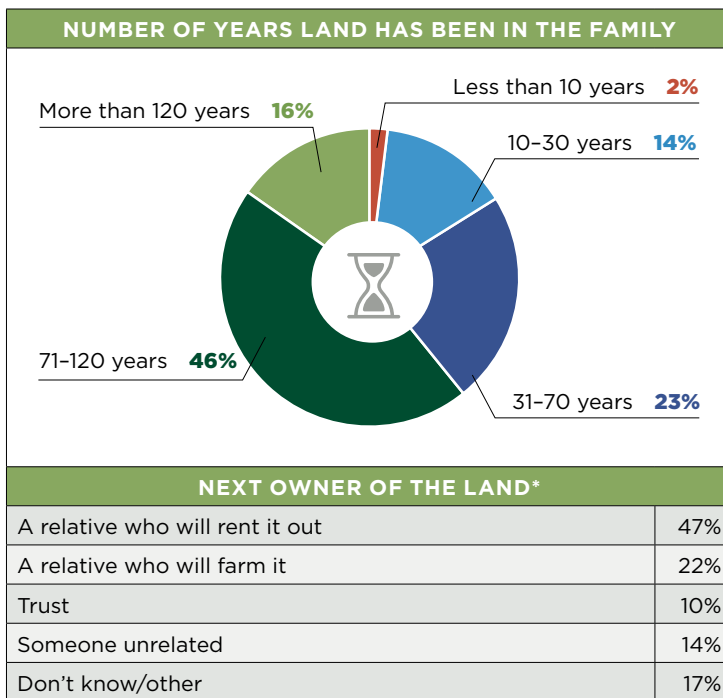
and are likely to
keep the land in
family hands

Table 1. Key Landowner Stats

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE OF FARMLAND TO HOUSEHOLD*	
Immediate income and a primary source of household income	13%
Immediate income but not a primary source of household income	64%
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 Washington, we surveyed 319 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 (40%) rent their land to a relative or family member, while 34% rent to neighbors, friends and family, and the rest (24%) rent to someone who is not related nor a friend of the family. The majority (66%) of lease agreements are written and most are a sharecrop agreement (76%). Additionally, landlords have typically been renting their land to the same operator for an extended period of time, with the median length of time being 15 years, representing longstanding 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 soil erosion control. (Table 4)



SELECT FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP WITH FARMER

Generally, the landowners surveyed

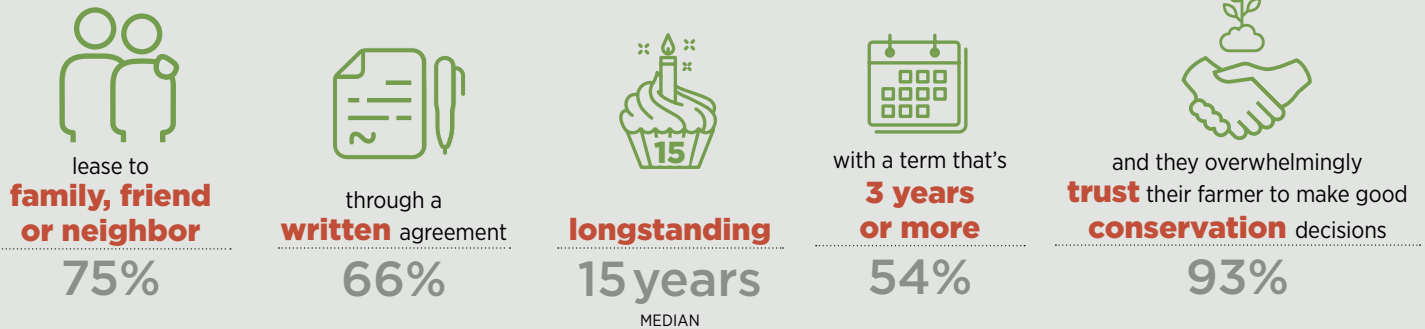


Table 3. Qualities Most Frequently Cited as “Somewhat Important” or “Very Important” when Evaluating Current or Potential Farm Operators

MOST IMPORTANT OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS	
Trustworthiness	98%
They care about my land	98%
They are financially responsible	97%
Ability to maintain soil productivity	96%
Reputation as a good farmer	95%
Ability to avoid soil erosion	95%

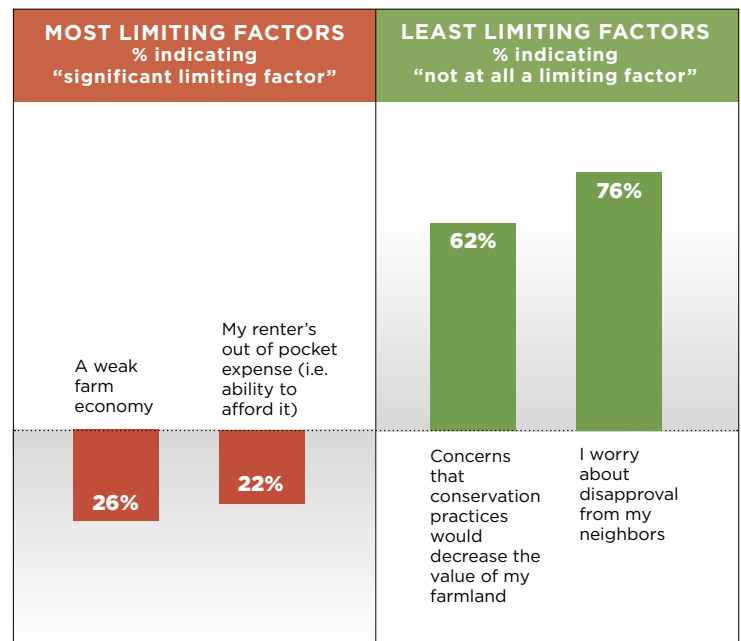
Table 4. Sources & Needs for Information on Conservation

MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF CONSERVATION INFORMATION	
My farm operator/lessee	83%
Local County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD)	64%
Farm or ranch manager	61%
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	59%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN RECEIVING INFORMATION AND/OR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Soil fertility improvement	38%
Soil erosion control	35%
Government conservation programs	34%
Water quality improvement	32%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN INTERVENTIONS (TOP 3 CHOICES)	
Having access to educational materials developed for non-operating landowners like you	31%
Having access to leasing tools that better account for costs, benefits, and timeliness of implementing conservation practices	21%
Working with a government agency in providing conservation services targeted to non-operating landowners	17%
Belonging to a network of non-operating farmland owners who face similar challenges as you do.	17%

Washington 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 Washington NOLs in our survey saw a weak farm economy and their renter’s out of pocket expense (i.e. ability to afford it) as their biggest barriers, very few worried about disapproval from their neighbors or that conservation practices would decrease the value of their farmland.

Table 5. Barriers to Conservation on Their Rented Land





Washington 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	93%
I am committed to my operator's continuation as a renter of my land	89%
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	77%
I am comfortable asking my operator to amend or make an addendum to our lease requiring conservation practices	57%

Washington 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)

Keeping land in farming	89%
Soil quality	86%
Needs of the farm operator leasing my land	86%
Need for income from the land	85%
Future generations of my family	80%
Water quality	71%
The neighboring landowners	65%
Wildlife habitats	60%
The surrounding community(ies)	52%

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CONCLUSION

These findings and others from the survey can begin to help policymakers, natural resource agencies, and conservation groups understand how best to work with non-operating landowners to achieve more effective resource management of rented lands. Of the most important action items for Washington, 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.
4. The large percentage of landowners who do not live on the rented land (80%), and the relatively large median distance for those who live away from the land (median of 152 miles) could indicate an **additional barrier for face-to-face communication and engagement with the operator** vis-à-vis the implementation of conservation practices.

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 groeschmcnally@farmland.org or **(360) 631-8489**.

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