

# Hopes, Challenges, and Concerns for Land Access and Succession Planning

## FINDINGS FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FARMERS ACROSS THE U.S.

According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, more than half (58%) of all U.S. farms have at least one female decision maker.<sup>1</sup> Women farmers currently account for 41% of beginning producers and 36% of all producers.<sup>1,2</sup> Among all women producers, only a small percentage (12%) focuses on the production of commodity row-crops such as oilseed, grains, cotton, and tobacco. Nonetheless, those growers represent little over a quarter of all farmers growing those crops.<sup>3</sup>

While these data show that female producers are significant contributors to U.S. agriculture, women still face difficulties being accepted as farmers, especially when it comes to commodity production.<sup>4,5</sup> We hosted a series of interviews and listening sessions with commodity growers, between February 2021-March 2024, to learn more about the experiences of women farmers in U.S. row-crop commodity agriculture and the role they play in the industry.

This three-part-series will explore what we learned during those conversations and suggest ways to better support women farmers.

In the last two decades, the U.S. Census of Agriculture has registered a steady increase in farmers' average age (from 53.2 years old in 2002 to 58.1 in 2022) and a decrease in both the number of farms (from 2.13 million in 2002 to 1.90 in 2022) and acres of land in agriculture (from 938 million acres in 2002 to 880 in 2022).<sup>6</sup> Faced with these trends, it is important to reflect on what the transition among farming generations will look like and what challenges growers might encounter. Literature shows that land access impacts the ability of farmers to have a profitable business and that succession planning is critical to the survival of a farm operation over multiple generations.<sup>7,8</sup>

Additionally, we know that women farmers experience specific challenges related to land tenure.<sup>7</sup> During our listening sessions, we

asked women farmers to share their experiences with *land access* and *succession planning*. This last report of our three-part series presents those stories and sheds light on the challenges, hopes, and concerns women from different generations have for their land.

## THE LAST FARMING GENERATION

Several women farmers spoke about the challenges of being the last farming generation in the family. These were women who were approaching retirement age, and either didn't have children or had children who decided to pursue careers outside of farming. In many cases, these women talked about three main struggles:

- **Wanting to preserve the family legacy.** Some women were already exploring the possibility of selling land to farming friends or neighbors. They talked about the hardship of letting go of the land and, with it, the family legacy built on it. "No one's going to take care of your farm like you did, and so that's kind of hard, plus the fact that we've been able to keep this farm in [our family] for 110 years already. There is something in that legacy and the connection that you have personally to your own farm," Julie [NE]<sup>a</sup> said.
- **Wondering if they could have done more to encourage the next farming generation.** Some women questioned past choices and regretted not providing their children with clear ways to stay on the farm. Julie [NE]<sup>a</sup> clearly expressed this sentiment, "We never really did our job, I think, in helping [our children] see where they could be in this operation in some manner. [...] we were more of a cheerleader for them and whatever they did, and not so much a cheerleader for our farm. And so, I think that was one thing that we did wrong." This reflection was

<sup>a</sup>All the quotes in this document are presented using pseudonyms.

sometimes also framed through gender lenses, “... girls were not put forefront into agriculture like I see it now, and I think that would have helped [make our daughters more interested in agriculture].” [Dianne, SC]<sup>a</sup>

- **Wanting to maintain the land in agriculture.** Most women in this situation also expressed a strong desire to keep their property in agriculture. They were concerned that future heirs would want to use the land for different purposes, so they were exploring ways to prevent that. “Everybody has an idea of what they want to do with the land, how they see the land. And it’s not necessarily for farming. [...] The other thing that we’re looking at is a land trust and looking at donating the land, if no one is interested [in farming] so it can always be a green space.” [Valerie, NC]<sup>a</sup>

## SUCCESSION CREATES TENSION AND CONCERNS

Conversations around succession planning, and lack thereof, can create a sense of uncertainty and tension within the family farm<sup>8</sup>. Notably, even when feelings were shared by multiple generations, common ground was hard to find:

- **Need to plan for the future.** Many young women farmers spoke of the deep sense of uncertainty that comes with the lack of a clear succession plan for their family farm. These women, many of whom had parents or grandparents who did not want to discuss transition, felt that this hindered their ability to plan for their future and the future of the family operation. “... there’s no plan in place that I’m aware of, and it’s really tough for me to bring up to [my dad] because he’s sensitive to it. I don’t want to feel like I’m pushing him out, but he farms a good bit of land, too, and someday, we would like the opportunity to farm it. But I’m 45 years old now. We need to be prepared if we’re going to take on that much more land.” [Elaine, PA]<sup>a</sup>
- **Reluctance to stop farming.** While the older generation recognized the importance of passing down the farm, discussing succession plans often elicited a sense of vulnerability toward their role and involvement in the operation. During the conversation with Elaine, Dianne [SC]<sup>a</sup> replied, “... you really aren’t ready just to hand it over. [...] The ones who are in my age group, yes, we want the farm to go to somebody. Are we ready to release it to them? No. So, I can kind of see how [your] parents are feeling. You don’t want to think about it.”

**While these issues are common to many farmers, independent of their gender identity, our participants also expressed challenges specifically related to their experience as women.**

## GENDERED LINES OF SUCCESSION

Unclear succession plans were a major stressor for women whose families historically considered a son the natural successor.<sup>9</sup> “[In my family] there was always a very distinct line of succession. The one male in the family was gonna get the farm. And so, I find myself very stressed frequently

because I farm with my dad [... but] I do have a younger brother. He lives on the farm here. He has zero interest in farming, [but it isn’t clear that I will be the one inheriting the farm].” [Kate, MD]<sup>a</sup>

## NAVIGATING RELATIONS WITH IN-LAWS

Finally, a few women raised issues related to land access and succession planning when coming to farming through marriage. Barbara [MD]<sup>a</sup> said, “My in-laws didn’t even want my name on the farm,” and Alice [MO]<sup>a</sup> shared, “I don’t always feel like I can be allowed a voice in that situation because I’m not in that family dynamic.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Increase access to succession planning experts and facilitators.** Family farms would benefit from starting conversations about farm transition early<sup>8</sup>. Practitioners should include succession planning in their regular programming, encourage farmers to undertake this process, and support these hard discussions by connecting farmers with facilitators. Advisors and facilitators should be aware of the role gender can play in family dynamics and help families navigate potential biases. Programs like American Farmland Trust’s [Land Transfer Navigators](#) can equip them with the tools to support equitable and successful transitions.

**Increase and improve mentor-mentee programs that connect the “last generation” to new farmers.** Through initiatives like [Find A Farmer](#) and [Future Farms Programs](#), young farmers can more easily gain access to land, and retiring producers can ensure their land stays in agriculture. Additionally, by creating those connections, new farmers could benefit from the knowledge and networks of “last generation” farmers, who, in turn, would remain involved and preserve their legacy in new ways.



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**For more information, visit: [www.farmland.org/women](http://www.farmland.org/women)**

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