

# Survey of Delaware Young Farmer Loan Program Participants: Results Summary

## Land Access Policy Incentives Research & Extension Project

[Indiana University Food and Agrarian Systems](#)

Julia Valliant (jdv@iu.edu) and Marie O'Neill (mtoneill@iu.edu)

In consultation with [American Farmland Trust](#) and [MARBIDCO](#)

## Summary

Here are preliminary results from a 2023 survey of participants in Farmland Purchase and Protection Incentive Programs (FPPIs) in two Mid-Atlantic states, Delaware and Maryland, conducted by the Indiana University Food and Agrarian Systems Program as part of a USDA-funded [assessment of land access incentive policies nationwide](#). Delaware and Maryland offer distinctive but similar farmland access and protection incentives to their young and beginning farmers. Here are Delaware's results.

Over half of the Delaware farmers who had enrolled in the [Young Farmer Loan Program](#) (YFLP) since 2011 filled out the survey (21 respondents of about 37 possible, or 57%). They represented all Delaware counties. [Find more detailed survey results here.](#)



## Takeaways to understand

Nearly all survey respondents believe that the Young Farmers Loan Program provided an opportunity to purchase farmland that they otherwise may not have had, and this opportunity contributed to the success of their farm operation.

Without the YFLP, 14 farmers (67%) said they would have needed to compromise more on the land they purchased and 17 (81%) agreed that the YFLP helped their farm operation to succeed.

We also asked if the YFLP farmer continues to face a land access challenge at the present time, even after purchasing a farm of their own. A majority (62%) agreed that they do still face challenges accessing land. While a few farmers have even gone on to purchase more land since enrolling in the YFLP, one farmer now owns less acreage than they originally purchased through the YFLP, and one no longer personally farms their YFLP land.

## Who is participating in the Young Farmer Loan Program?

Participating farmers in Delaware's program must be between the ages of 18-40, meaning this program prioritizes young farmers. The average age of farmers when they enrolled in YFLP is 28, with an age range from 21 to 40. Most (81%) of the participants grew up farming. On this note, only 4 respondents purchased the YFLP land from a relative, while 16 purchased the land from someone they are not related to. This indicates that YFLP is working to serve both inter-family transfer of farmland and also transfers to those who may not have otherwise had an opportunity to purchase acreage within their families.

A majority (57%) of the YFLP farmers are growing feed-grade grains. A quarter of the respondents are raising poultry or livestock either as the sole operation or in combination with other products.

Another quarter of respondents are raising forages. Of the survey participants, only one is raising annual horticultural crops, one is raising food grade grains, and one is farming timber. At least half of the respondents (52%) are selling their farm products to commodity markets while 4 are selling directly to consumers or through intermediated markets, like grocers.

YFLP farmers purchased an average of 98 acres through the program with a median (middle value) of 94 acres and a range of 20 to 205 acres. Most respondents did not own farmland prior to purchasing land with the YFLP (81%). YFLP farmers reported that they rent an additional 35 acres to farm (median value, range of 0 acres to 1800 acres). As a group, these farmers aspire for their farm operations to reach 960 acres in size (median value, range of 50 to 4,000 acres). Only one farmer gained access through the YFLP to all of the land they aspired to farm. Most of the respondents wish to one day farm more land than what they currently own. In fact, given this overall pattern, their YFLP purchase of 98 acres represents one-tenth of the total agricultural land base they hope to operate as a group.

When asked what percentage of their household income comes from farming, over one-third of respondents (38%) indicated that less than 25% of their household income is farm income, so most of their household income comes from an off-farm source. Only one farmer indicated that 75-100% of their household income is farm income. This means that the YFLP program is usually serving households whose livelihoods mainly come from off-farm sources.

In terms of other general demographics, most respondents identified as White only (67%), one of these respondents also identifies as another race and one respondent is not White. Only one of the respondents is a woman while most of the respondents are men.

## Farming practices and management changes

Because the YFLP guarantees permanent access to farmland, young farmers who participate have a greater opportunity to utilize conservation practices or otherwise manage their land with long-term considerations. When farmers were asked if they had made any changes to the management of the land purchased through the YFLP, 9 reported no changes from the previous farmer. Six farmers mentioned crop rotations and 5 farmers mentioned reduced tillage as new conservation practices. Some farmers have added enterprises to the operation since participating in the YFLP. Additions include 4 farmers who have added livestock/poultry, one farmer who reported adding perennial crops, and one farmer who has added food-grade grains.

Nearly half of the YFLP farmer respondents (43%) are enrolled in USDA/NRCS conservation programs. The others were not enrolled (38%) or did not respond (19%). Only one of the farmers reported transitioning some of the land to USDA Certified Organic management practices, the rest are not USDA Certified Organic.

## Farmland preservation

The 21 respondents have enrolled over 1500 acres in the YFLP. This means that at least 1500 acres in Delaware are enrolled in farmland preservation and will be protected as farmland in perpetuity. When we asked farmers if they would have considered land preservation even if they had not participated in the YFLP, 15 farmers (71%) agreed with this statement. YFLP offers the opportunity to protect agricultural land to those who value the preservation of farmland for future generations.

## Difficulties using the program

We asked YFLP farmers to rate the difficulty of a few aspects of participating in the YFLP. When asked about the overall difficulty, most of the farmers (81%) found the program easy to use or were neutral. Three farmers found the program difficult to use. We asked about the specific difficulties of finding land that qualified for the YFLP program and organizing the transaction with the landowner. Response patterns were similar around the specific difficulties of finding land that qualified for the YFLP, and the challenge of organizing the transaction with the landowner.

The greatest challenge is the time necessary to close on the purchase of the land. Several YFLP farmers noted that landowners can be unwilling or unable to wait for the farmer to organize the purchase using the YFLP.



## Land Prices and Purchase Funds

Nine of respondents purchased a property worth between \$250,000 to \$500,000. 7 respondents purchased a property worth between \$500,000-\$1 million. The average cost per acre of all respondents' properties was \$6,489. The median price was \$6,000 per acre, with a range from \$1,000 per acre to \$12,680 per acre.

Most YFLP farmers received funding from both the Delaware Department of Agriculture (DDA) and one commercial lender. The median amount loaned from DDA was \$195,000 while the median loan amount from the commercial lender was \$194,000. Farmers themselves provided a median of \$24,500 for the purchase, with 4 farmers indicating that they shouldered some cost of the purchase. Other sources of funding reported include family gifts or loans, and other formal lenders.

## Farm Housing

[Access to housing](#) is a topic that often accompanies questions and solutions for farmland access. While not all farmers must live on the land they farm, it is preferable for many farmers. We wanted to dig into whether YFLP farmers are now living on the land they purchased. Only 5 of the YFLP farmers report that the land they purchased had a habitable residence on it. Three residences have been constructed since the land was enrolled in YFLP while 3 other farmers intend to build a residence in the future.

## Expanding the Young Farmer Loan Program to serve more groups of Historically Underserved farmers

Our study looks at how other states' land access policies facilitate farmland purchases for beginning farmers as well as more types of Historically Underserved farmers. [Historically Underserved](#) is a USDA definition that includes beginning, limited resource, veteran, and socially disadvantaged or Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian, and other farmers of color. A question in the survey asked farmers in Delaware's Young Farmer Loan Program how much they would agree with expanding YFLP to serve more subgroups of Historically Underserved farmers. Nine farmers were in agreement or neutral while six disagreed with this idea.

