Understanding integrated crop and livestock farming systems: farmer survey results
Integrated Crop & Livestock farms only

Match Made in Heaven: Livestock + Crops, October 2024

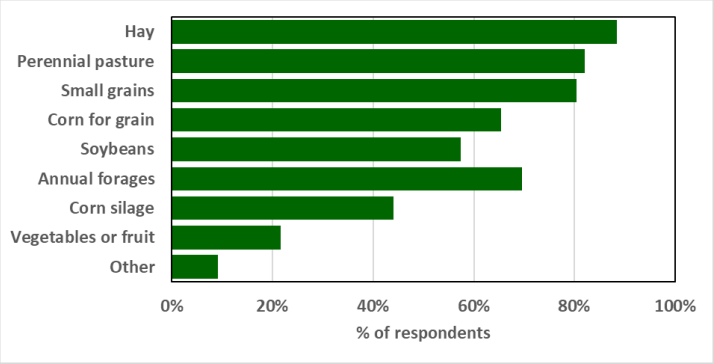
In 2023 through April of 2024, the Match Made in Heaven project (MMIH) surveyed 553 farmers primarily in the 6 Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. The majority of respondents (457) currently have an integrated system with both annual crops and livestock. Another 50 respondents had raised livestock within the last three years. The goal of the survey was to understand the benefits associated with integration of livestock into annual cropping systems as well as the barriers to doing so. This fact sheet provides a snapshot of what we learned.

Demographics

- 457 survey responses
- 25 states represented
- Average age: 49
- Average years farming: 24
- Average acres owned: 284 (range: 0 to 3000)
- Average acres rented: 273 (range: 0 to 3500)
- Raised livestock in the last 3 years: 507 respondents

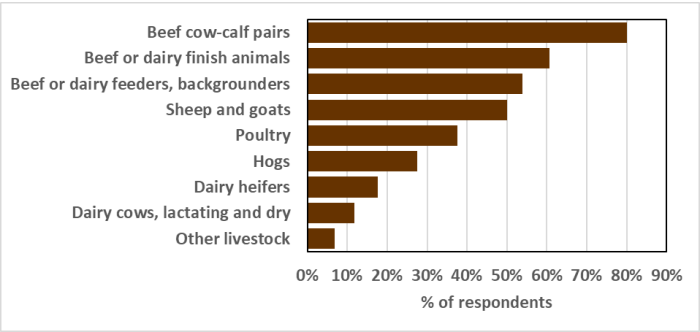
What do integrated farms look like?

Crop production. Because these respondents are raising livestock, their cropping mix skews toward forage crops and pasture. These farmers also raise a variety of common crops and many use cover crops and annual forages in their rotations.



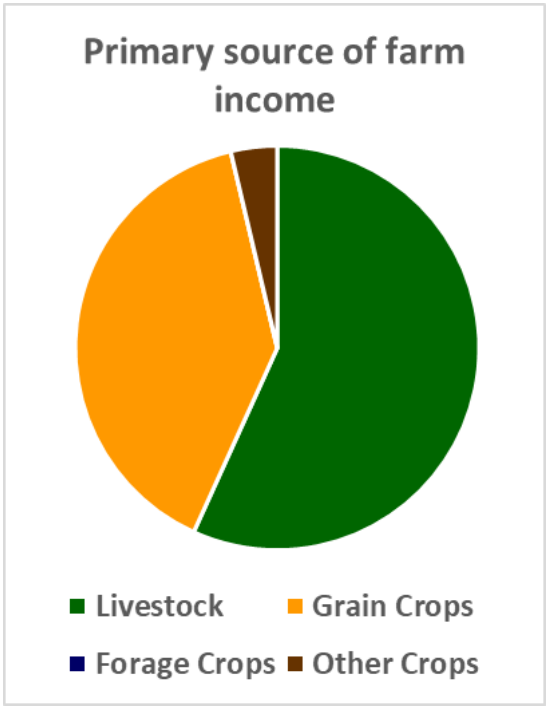
Livestock types

Our respondents raise a wide range of livestock types, but a majority raise beef animals.

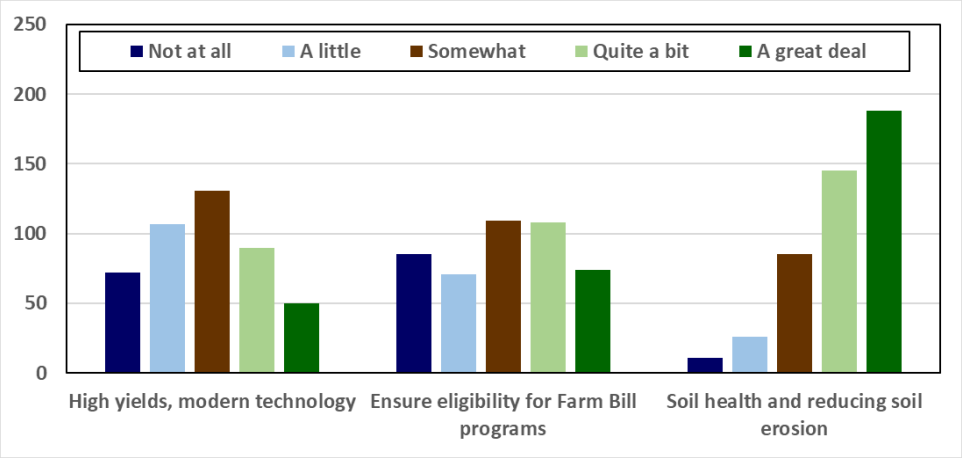


Economics of integrated farms

A majority of respondents reported that **livestock** was their primary source of income from farming, with the second largest category being grain crops (see pie chart).



Motivation for choosing integrated systems

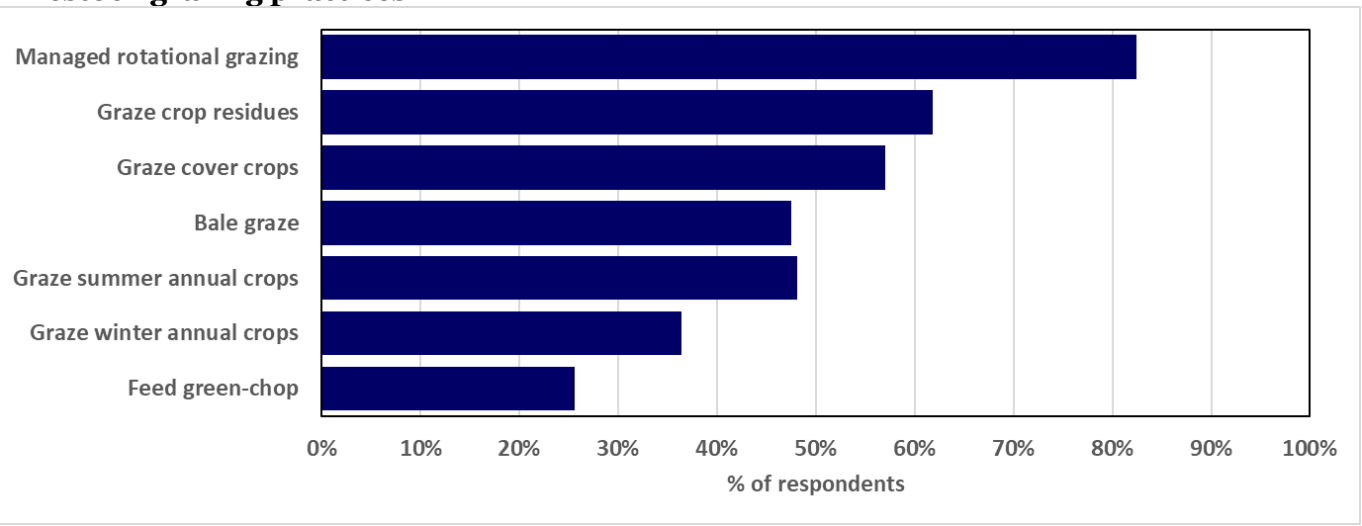


Respondents were asked how closely several approaches matched their own motivations for making farming decisions. Many of the respondents were strongly motivated by **soil health** and reducing soil erosion, more so than increasing yields or eligibility for Farm Bill programs.

Livestock integration and soil health practices used

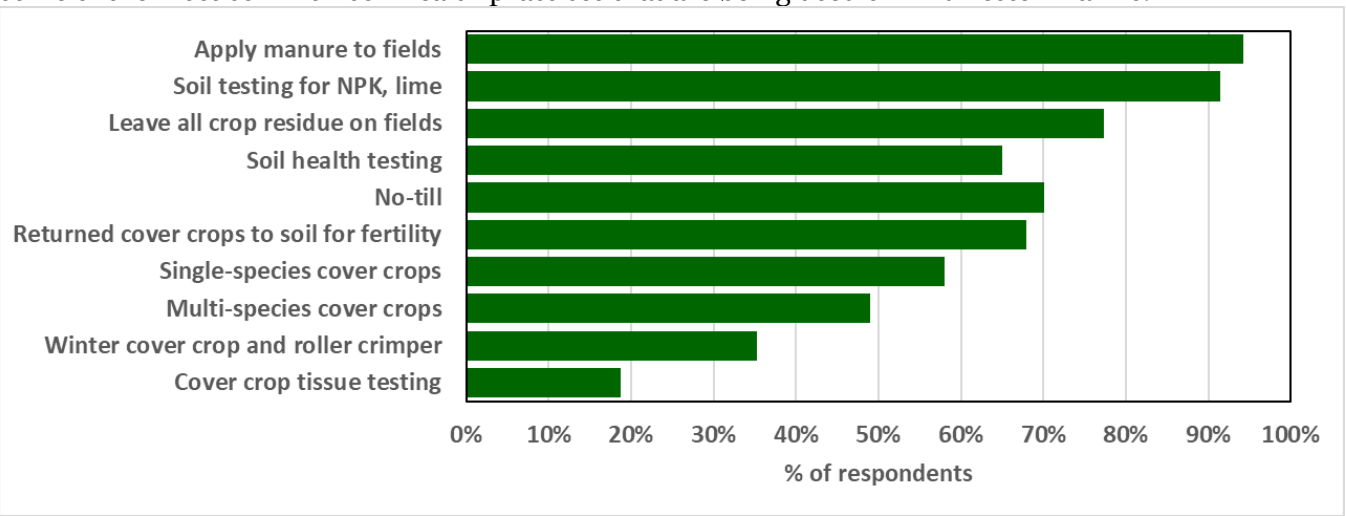
Survey respondents use a variety of livestock grazing practices, but a majority do managed rotational grazing. Smaller majorities graze crop residues and cover crops.

Livestock grazing practices



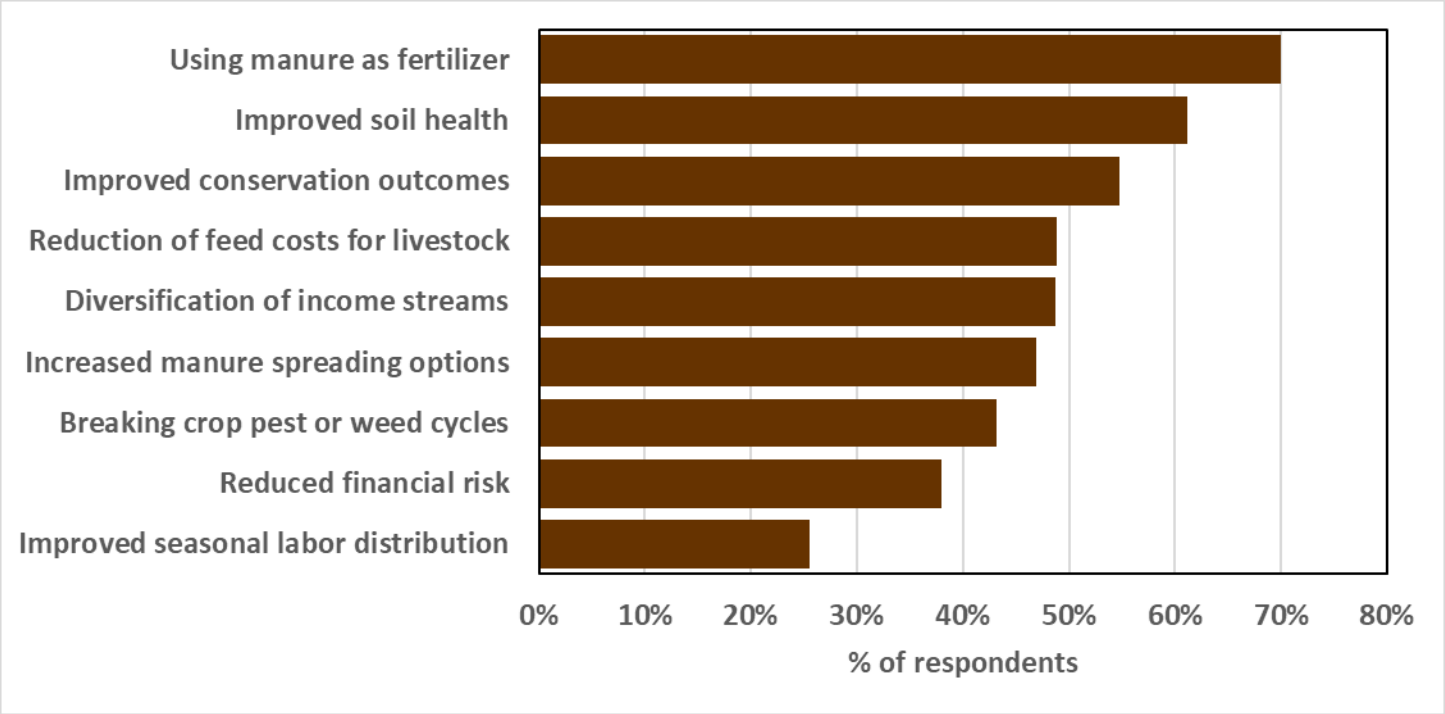
Soil health practices

Respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding their soil management practices. This chart shows some of the most common soil health practices that are being used on Midwestern farms.



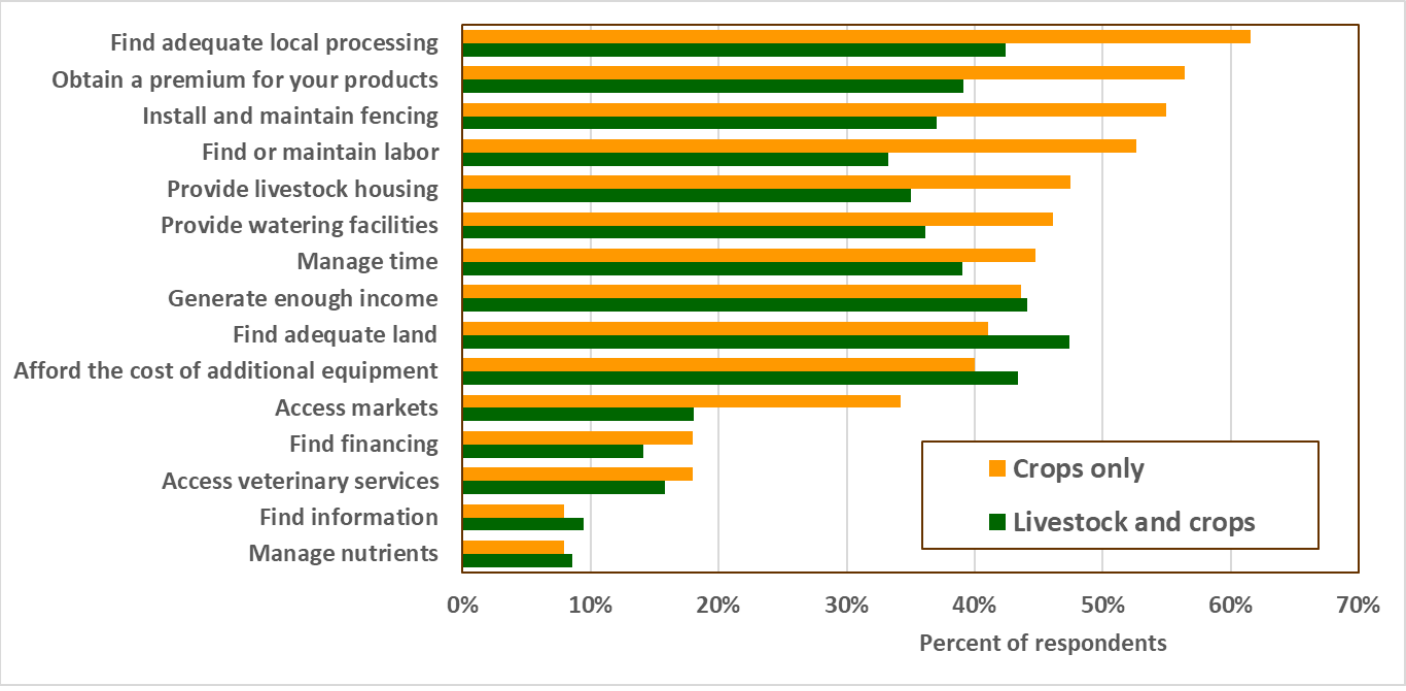
Integration benefits

Respondents were asked about what they perceived as the most beneficial aspects of integrated crop and livestock systems. The graph below shows the percent of respondents valuing potential livestock integration benefits 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal'.



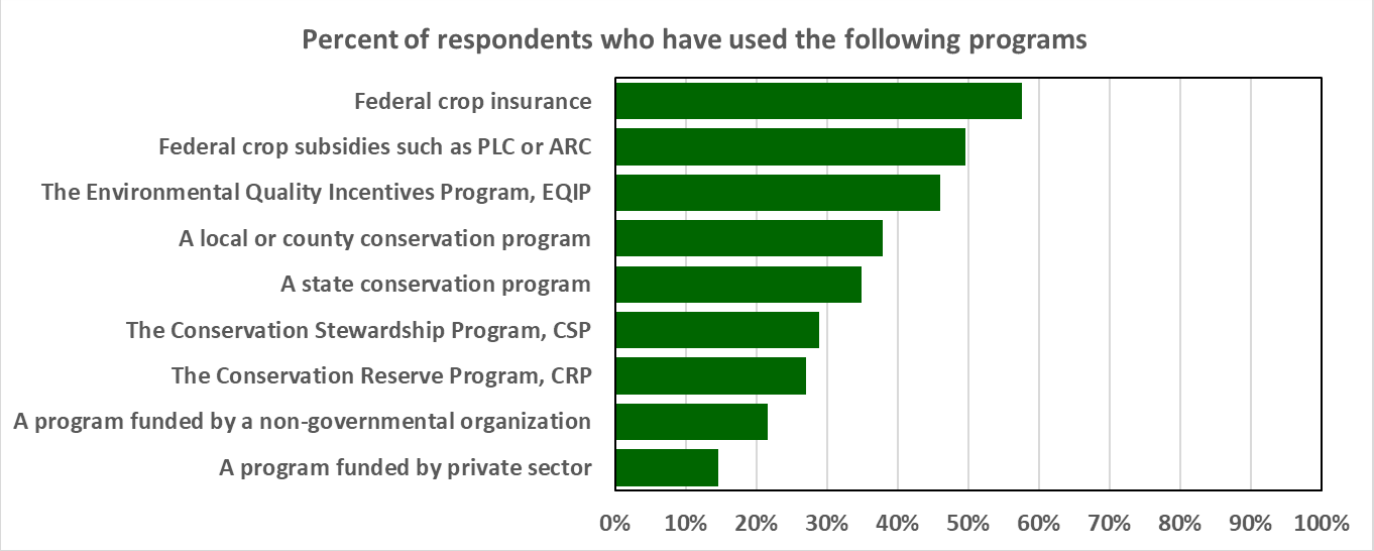
Integration challenges

Farmers with integrated crop and livestock systems were asked how challenging various aspects of integration were for them. We also asked crops only farmers what they perceived as challenges associated with adding livestock to their operations. The chart compares percentages of respondents who view each item as “very” or “extremely” challenging. Several topics were considered significantly more challenging by crops only farmers than they actually are for farmers with integrated systems. There were also a few topics that integrated farms found were more challenging than crops only farmers thought they might be.



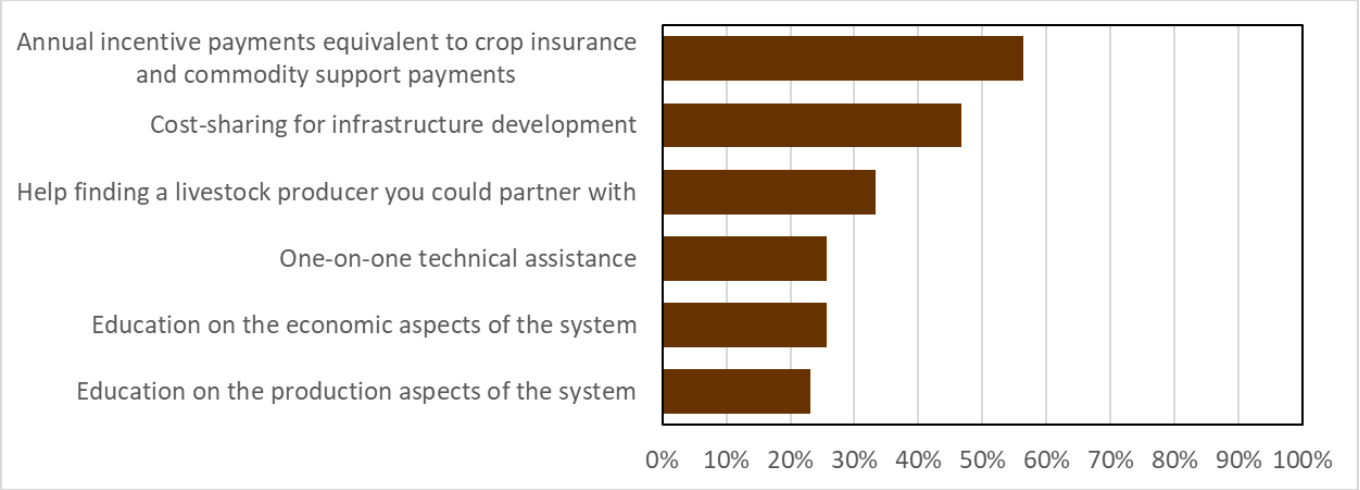
Incentives for integrating livestock into cropping operations

A large proportion of respondents reported NOT participating in programs that encourage adoption of soil health and conservation practices. The graph below shows that the most commonly used program is federal crop insurance, followed by other federal subsidy programs.



Opportunities to help crops-only farmers add livestock to their operations

Crops-only farmers were asked what kinds of assistance would help them overcome the barriers to adding a livestock enterprise to their farming operations and were offered a series of potential support options. The graph below shows that a majority of respondents expressed interest in incentive payments equivalent to supports provided for commodity crop production. Cost sharing for fencing and watering systems was also desired by nearly half of respondents.



Background information

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"Match Made In Heaven: Livestock + Crops" is a 3-year, 6-state grant project led by Green Lands Blue Waters that creates opportunities for farmers to share their interests, challenges, and needs, and for the crop and livestock organizations that they engage with to hear from their members and meet their needs with their programming and resources. The project is a collaboration between 50+ groups including crop and livestock associations, universities, public agencies, and soil/water groups. In addition to the survey, project elements include case studies of 8 farmers with integrated systems, highlighting their unique systems and innovations, a series of field days being conducted in 2024 and a resource library of materials on crop and livestock integration. Learn more at https://greenlandsbluewaters.org/match-made-in-heaven-livestock-crops/

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