A Needs-Based Assessment

of Four Sustainable Farms in Iowa

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North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

February 2026

Summary

Financial and systemic stressors experienced by small-scale, sustainable farmers can be eased when they are provided with upfront financial support, advanced training, and tailored consultation services. Across the United States, the number of farms continues to decline each year; however, in Iowa, growth in the number of producers and small-sized farms is challenging this national trend. This research study, conducted in partnership between the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) and the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NRC-SARE) program, used data from four small Iowa producers to determine the needs, gaps in knowledge, opportunities, and challenges experienced on their operations.

Data was gathered from participants using surveys, document submissions and farm visits. Educational materials and pathways to fill gaps identified from the responses were then created and shared. From these measures and background research, findings supported that farmers' growth and viability was constrained by labor shortages, high initial financial risk, climate uncertainty, and limited access to specialized business and infrastructure support. This information is relevant to organizations who support producers because they can help point farmers towards solutions by knowing the barriers they are likely to face.

Introduction

In the past 10 years, the state of Iowa has been following a national downtrend in the total number of farms in the United States, associated with a large turnover of local family farms to corporate-run entities. Despite this fact, a 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture reveals that there was a notable 7.9% increase in the number of farm producers in Iowa between 2017 and 2022 and a 1% rise in the number of farms that had not been observed since the 2007 census. This was accompanied by more small (less than 100 acres) and medium (less than 999 acres) farms in the state, accounting for the total number, where the greatest addition was 1014 new small farms (1). Census statistics show that small operations run by beginning farmers accounted for both in-state rises in the number of farms from 2017 to 2022 but also the majority of losses (residence, sales) from 2013 to 2023 (1;8).

As of 2021, 24 million acres of Iowa's land was in agricultural production, where 94% of this land was solely in commodity production corn and soybean row crops. In contrast to this overwhelming degree of output, the state imports 95% of its food for domestic consumption (1;2). There has been legitimate concern caused by the impacts of large-scale single-crop agriculture practices that result from this dominant method of farming. Observed negative effects range from soil erosion, localized and far-reaching excessive pollutants in waterways, and greenhouse gas release from tilling and export

of goods out of the state. As a result, it is increasingly regarded that sustainable, regenerative and organic farming practices, along with eating locally grown food, can effectively mitigate and prevent a wide variety of these negative impacts on the environment and human health (14;5).

Given this background, out of Iowa's 86,911 farms, only 799 were of certified organic status the year prior, with just 2,650 acres dedicated to fruit and vegetable production (4). There is an increase in interest and demand in operations using sustainable practices among consumers across the country (11), in Iowa (15) and among new farmers (12), however, information about the formation of these operations is without much wide-reaching evaluation.

As the economic landscape changes, there is evidence to suggest small scale farming is becoming more difficult and financially stressful, even as the number of small farms in Iowa climbs annually (1;9). A January 2025 Journal of Agriculture and Applied Economics study suggests that a farm's success is indicated by growth and survival for its first five seasons, where a farmer's failure is more likely if they (a) did not receive funding from agricultural programming, (b) did not sell products directly to customers, (c) produced only niche commodity goods, and (d) were a part of a marginalized social group (7). There are organizations and agencies that have programs that provide various resources to help support these small and beginning farmers, from large organizations like Iowa State University Extension & Outreach and Practical Farmers of Iowa, and more specific organizations such as the Women Food & Agriculture Network. Awareness, limited funds, and services often fluctuate between these different organizations, and due to this fluctuation, services and funding from year to year are generally regarded as underutilized.

In response and recognition of these realities, a partnership in the form of a grant between the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) and the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education program (NRC-SARE) was established to conduct this study. SILT is a land trust dedicated to protecting working farms to grow healthy food by making land more accessible to farmers who need it and ensuring landowners' property is protected for table food farming. With the help of SILT, growers can rent or purchase land at a reduced price to grow table food (3). NRC-SARE is a competitive grant and education program that funds projects focused on advancing agricultural innovation, profitability, natural resource stewardship, and quality of life for producers and their communities (6). Together, SILT and NRC-SARE embarked on a partnership grant for an 18-month study, executed by SILT staff and funded by NCR-SARE.

In recognition of the time, effort, and valuable insight participants in this study contributed on top of their existing responsibilities, each participant received a stipend for their involvement in the project. This study used farmer-provided data to assess their approaches and determine what skills, practices, knowledge, and awareness the participants were lacking and created materials and pathways to fill those gaps. To help identify the vulnerabilities and opportunities for growth for the participants, our objectives concentrated on:

- Documenting needs, gaps in knowledge, successes, and challenges of participants.
- Creating materials and methods to address common points of difficulty.
- Sharing identified solutions online and in print.

These insights into common hardships, solutions, and methods of success will help future and current small-scale, sustainable farmers in Iowa in similar situations, as well as advise outreach on how to better serve them.

Methods

Prior to the beginning of the project in April of 2024, Julie Falcon, the project Farm Coordinator, contacted small farmers within SILT's wide circle of producers to gauge interest in participating in the study. This was essential because land access is one of the largest initial barriers to farming, so SILT ensured operations had already overcome this overwhelming challenge, whether they rented or owned the land. In this way the study could give a more detailed look at problems that occur after acquiring land. Other qualities sought were farms that used regenerative, organic, or non-commercial farming practices to produce edible food. Participants were chosen based upon their operation's range in production, scale, and location provided to cover the wide spectrum of "small" and sustainable farming. Referred to as Participants A, B, C, and D, four farmers that met these criteria were secured and their attributes are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Gives basic information on each of the four participants, including what part of Iowa they are in, what products they produce, the acreage of their farm, how many full-time workers they have, how long they have been farming, and the duration of time they have been on their specific operation. *Participant

B and C have recently moved or expanded the areas that they farm on. Participant B now has a total of 170 acres. **Participant C was able to acquire a second full time farmer while the study was under way.

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Region	Central	Southwest	Northeast	East Central
Farm Product	Fruits, Vegetables, Chickens	Highland Cattle, Sheep	Flowers, Vegetables	Vegetables
Acres	60	60 → 170*	17.5 +*	2
Land Status	Owner	Renter	Renter	Renter
Years Farming	15	4	5	6
Years on Operation	4	2	3	2
Full Time Workers	2	1	1 + 1**	1

Figure 1.**A**: Chickens on Participant A's pasture. **B**: Herd of Participant B's Highland cattle. **C**: Participant C in their high tunnel/hoop house. **D**. Covered rows on Participant D's operation with volunteers weeding.

Along with an initial farm visit on site of their operation, participants provided data in three survey forms at the beginning, mid point, and end point of the study via Google Forms. Pictures were also taken on farm visits or provided by the participants when possible. The initial survey contained 14 questions and was sent out on April 20th, 2024. The six-month survey contained seven questions and was sent out on September 30th, 2024, and the final survey contained eight questions and was sent out on November 24th, 2025. Questions asked satisfied four general categories:

- Background/Demographics
    - Asked for general information about their operation, i.e. location, how long they have been farming, certifications, what they produce, sustainable implementation.
- Market Evaluation
    - Asked about their business plan, where they sell their products, how they market them, and financial outlook.
- Farmer-Identified Challenges
    - Open-ended questions directly asking what participants struggle to acquire/achieve in their daily operations.
- Farmer-Identified Opportunities
    - Open-ended questions directly asking what participants find successful about their farms and what they cite would support this success.

Educational Materials & Workshops

Based on the data collected from the participants, SILT held two 1.5-hour webinars featuring presentations from various agricultural organizations and professionals in Iowa to disseminate information that would be useful to a wider audience of farmers. The webinars were recorded and posted on SILT's Youtube channel to ensure access to them as resources at any time.

The first webinar was held on October 5th, 2024, and featured 5 speaker presentations about services available to small and sustainable farmers on a variety of topics from business product differentiation to urban agriculture. General information on services of different Iowa organizations was presented by the Center for Energy & Environmental Education (CEEE) at University of Northern Iowa, Eat Greater Des Moines, Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, LSI Global Greens, and Iowa Valley RC&D. There was also a presentation from a guest farmer, Brady Folkestad, who focused on what markets and business model he operated with.

The second webinar was held on March 26th, 2025, and had a more specific focus about methods of food hub value chain coordination, you-pick harvesting, and locating funding sources. It featured longer presentations by three presenters: Kim Andersen of Blueberry Bottom Farm, Beth Romer, a Program Director of Choose Iowa, and Teresa Wiemerslage from the Iowa Extension Food Hub Managers Working Group. Additionally, print material was created by compiling resources beneficial to beginning farmers into a pamphlet utilizing information from both webinars (Figure 2).

Figure 2A. Outer pages of pamphlet containing SILT contact information and links to the Resources for Sustainable Food Farmers and Growing Your Farm: Marketing, Labor, and Funding Solutions webinars.

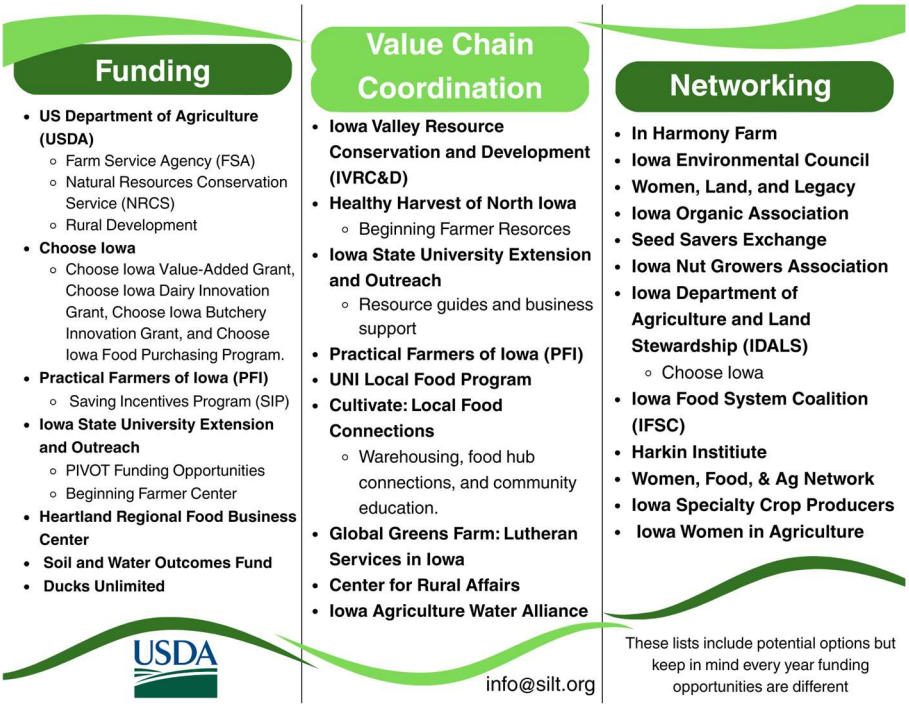

Figure 2B. Inner pages listing Iowa organizations that help small operations with funding, value chain coordination, and networking.

500 copies of the pamphlet were printed and distributed at summer farmers markets and events from June to September 2025 by collaborator and SILT State Coordinator, Katie Das. Events included the Valley Junction Farmers Market in Valley Junction, In Harmony Farms in Earlham, the Women in Agriculture Conference in Ankeny, LSI Global Greens Farmers Market, and the Iowa Farmers of Color Cookout event.

Results

Participant D was unable to continue farming for a multitude of reasons. They primarily grew produce for 3 locations of a local restaurant chain, where they farmed on land owned by the same owner of these restaurants. They cited a lack of support from the landowner and subsequent underutilization of produce grown for consumers as the main inhibitor to continuing. The participant was the only full-time worker on the farm and would occasionally have two to three volunteers help with weeding, planting, and harvesting. In addition to the restaurants, this farmer sold their produce at the Iowa City Farmer's Market, but a combination of a lack of consistent labor and underuse of product by the landowner made selling a majority of it improbable. Participant D’s data for the first six months of research is included in these results.

Survey Results Across Participants - Background Questions

To begin the project, there was no assumption made of the participants and assessing their needs simply consisted of asking for background information on what was most important to them and their operation. When asked about why they are dedicated to farming sustainably, all four participants reported a certain pride and peace of mind in producing food for their families and community along with the positive impacts it has on people and the climate at large. Participants A through C also reported being able to provide much of the food for their household from their own production. Regarding official certification of these practices, Participants A and C are Certified USDA Organic, but there were varying levels of interest and caution in the value of being certified. SILT also asked about their awareness of the assistance program that helps to mitigate the cost of certification:

> Participant A:
> In the past we've been USDA organic and used the cost share. I don't think it helps much on my scale [as] people know and trust us and trust we're not using synthetic chemicals. We are now looking into being certified by "Regenified" [Regenerative Agriculture Certification] as I feel like organic does not go far enough to describe our practices.
>
> Participant B:
> At this point in time we do not. I think over time we will work towards a certification but will have assistance in the process. I don't think [Certified] Organic would benefit me much on my business, I do think there are other certifications like animal welfare and grass raised that would benefit my operation more.
>
> Participant C:
> Certified organic does help us as we do more wholesale and grow. We receive the cost-share.
>
> Participant D:
> I hope to become certified this year. I will have to look into the cost assistance, as that is a barrier for me. [However], other than being a sign that I can put up at a market, I do not see how it would improve my operation, I already was doing things as organically as I possibly could without the certification.

Market Evaluation Questions

In inquiring about market trends and business plans, all participants reported that they update their business plans often, and most were interested in improving skills in business software and seeking financial advising. Direct-to-customer sales are the most

popular method of sale among participants. Participants A through C primarily use social media (Facebook and Instagram) to market their farm and products, along with their own websites. Participants B and C also partner with other farms to market their produce:

> Participant A:
> **We use Instagram and Facebook. We also have a website with a store. Having products people can click and buy online was a big game changer.** We don't do too much marketing outside social media. We try to show our story and growing practices and hope customers can relate and want to seek our products out.

> Participant C:
> **We also collaborate with fellow growers at [a neighboring farm] to tap into their network and decrease the marketing burden on both of our farms. We are interested in leaning more into wholesale sales in the future because we feel that we could achieve steadier, more predictable sales this way.** (Our direct markets can be unpredictable, and we struggle to sell all of our produce).We are currently seeking a mentor who can show us the ropes of wholesale, help make introductions, and help us examine what infrastructure/equipment we would need to scale up to growing wholesale quantities. We are getting consulting from the Food Finance Institute on this topic currently, via Practical Farmers of Iowa's Savings Incentive Program.

By the six-month survey, every participant reported steady or improving business traffic for the season. Participant C saw a 47% increase in farmer's market sales compared to the previous season due in part to moving to a bigger farm and securing an additional person to farm full-time instead of just one. It must be noted that this increase in sales traffic did not occur equally amongst goods. For example, Participant B, who has recently sold their goat herd in favor of sheep following their land expansion, was finding more success in the hired grazing business than Highland cattle sales:

> Participant B:
> On the goat grazing, our business traffic has increased quite a bit…I would say in general, the private landowner traffic [private business arrangements] has stayed steady, and the public land interests [government organizations] (state, city, and county parks, NRCS project opportunity etc.) have greatly increased.
> On the Highland breed traffic, it has declined in my opinion. It used to be [that] you would market a heifer for sale, and it would be gone within a day…You can still fetch the same price but it's a longer process than it used to be. The [fresh/frozen] beef side seems to be increasing.

Each participant recorded their income and expenses in different forms, where some incorporate outside income in their reports while others do not. This made a standard way of evaluating the farms complex as they don't all account for the same kinds of information. Participant C uses Quickbooks, and others are interested in training on the software, but cite time as a difficulty in getting there. From the financial information received from Participants A through C, their survey responses reflected the outcomes of their inputs, losses, and profits:

> Participant A:
> I have been farming since 2010. 2016 was the first year I was able to rely 100% on the farm to pay the bills. 2016-2020 were good for us, however now owning our own farm I find any extra income going right back into the farm and future projects.
>
> Participant B:
> We started our farm in spring 2020 with a handful of chickens. **The first year we made a profit was last year [2023], by a slim margin. So the third year we were profitable.** However, the ONLY reason we were profitable was because we did some cow flipping where we bought some cows for a good deal and were able to turn around and sell them for decent money.
>
> Participant C:
> I would say we were not profitable [in] our first 2 seasons as we did not pay ourselves much. This season, we aim to be profitable and pay ourselves a living wage during the growing season.
>
> Participant D:
> This is my sixth year farming... **I haven't made profit yet with the business, as this is only my second year running it and I farm on my own,** but I am expanding a lot and hope to profit this season or at least break even.

When asked how much time and money participants were reinvesting into their operation for upkeep and goal attainment, Participants A through C expressed that most, if not all, of the profit they make goes back into the farm. The most common areas of investment were cover crop seeds and fertility.

Farmer Identified Challenges

In asking about the participants' needs, a few common obstacles associated with small and sustainable farming were found. The most recurring issue amongst participants was the amount of time and labor they must invest in their operations. The fruit and vegetable growers use low to no till practices, and the livestock farmer uses

rotational grazing. These practices are important to the participant's values and the high quality of their products; however, they are deeply involved processes as a result. This is why labor is cited by multiple participants as the most troublesome issue at multiple points. When asked "What has been most difficult this season?" in the six-month survey, this commonality is apparent:

> Participant A:
> Finding qualified labor. More people who want to farm for a career would help!
>
> Participant B:
> The most difficult thing that is costing me now is having a bad breeding bull last year. We should have had 15 calves in the spring time. Instead, he didn't do his job well and we are going to begin calving any time. **If we had the calves in the spring, they would be weaned and ready for sale right now which means we could have counted on that income. Instead, we are missing that income and will not be able to sell the calves until the spring time**. This is the byproduct of a poor management decision and a lesson learned on my part as opposed to anything being able to aid me.
>
> Participant C:
> Working a reasonable number of hours while paying ourselves. We pay ourselves for 40 hours per week at $15 an hour, but we work much more than that.
>
> Participant D:
> **More hands is really what I need. I have the knowledge and the skill,** but as one person who is very ambitious, I tend to push my limits on what I can reasonably do on my own. I am grateful for volunteers, but to grow enough to provide all [the] produce to all the restaurants, I do believe I need a part time worker at least.

Some participants cite being beholden to weather and unpredictable climate conditions as a constant setback to be mindful of. For the growing season within the duration of this study, Participants B and C significantly altered their operation due to unexpected or abnormal weather conditions, and Participants A and C reported being able to recover from weather-related delays with minimal long-term negative impact:

> Participant A:
> Fall plantings got pushed back but look great now.
>
> Participant B:
> I had several animal losses due to extreme weather events. I also had missed income for my goat grazing due to tornadoes and floods that prevented me from completing projects.
>
> Participant C:

> We lost one high tunnel (140 ft.) and one caterpillar tunnel (100 ft.) this year and lost plastic on another high tunnel (140 ft.) in June. Cleaning up the mess and our plants from this took a great deal of time. We had to adjust some of our goals. We were able to adjust them in such a way that we could still continue to pay ourselves the wages we need to live our lives.

There were some difficulties that were less common among all participants. For those who utilize processing facilities for product inspection, the limited number of facility locations was cited as an issue:

> Participant A: For processing chickens for resale I now have to drive 3 hours to the nearest federally inspected locker. I find this ridiculous.

> Participant B:
> Right now, **we do everything USDA because we ship across state lines. Those are few and far between. Thankfully we live reasonably close to Omaha where there are a few.** I am not sure of [where] the closest state-inspected facility is that would allow me to sell within Iowa. There is a local non-inspected facility in the town over, but that requires them to pay me for a hanging weight and the locker for their processing - this leads to complications with the customer and is not an ideal way to sell beef in my opinion.

When asking about recent state and federal policy changes, one farmer detailed how they were affected:

> Participant C:
> We no longer had access to LFPA [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement] and LFS [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Program] sales through the Iowa Food Hub, which helped us sell excess produce since 2022. We might be impacted by losing tax credits on our health insurance. We have a high-deductible plan and expect it to go up $700 per month next year

Farmer Identified Opportunities – Specialized Development & Professional Consultation

When assessing where participants' operations can grow and improve, common themes were found regarding finding specialized equipment, finding reliable resources, and finding common space to share with likeminded farmers. On the topic of equipment, the participants shared that they have obtained most of the tools they need for everyday processes, and the only notable implements that could be upgraded are cold or drying storage and processing spaces that require a large upfront investment.

After initial data collection, it was determined that individualized and specialized assistance to the participants' needs would be more effective than a one-size-fits-all training session. There were a variety of ways each participant wanted to learn new skills and information, with some preferring in person and hands on experiences, while others preferred having online resources they could reference at any time and access while multi-tasking. Materials such as the webinars that SILT hosted were cited as great tools to help beginning farmers, but as farmers multiple seasons into their experience, the participants needed “deep dives into particular techniques” especially those that were business related (Participant C). In citing an exact need, each participant requested assistance that SILT helped secure.

Figure 3. Participant A’s rows of lettuce, labeled and ready for sale. May 2024.

Participant A utilized a subsidized portion of their stipend to purchase irrigation tools. It provided an improvement in water usage and time efficiency throughout the operation.

They stated that it helps the operation in the long-term because they prioritize daily efficiency and each purchase they make goes toward that goal.

Participant B consulted a Graze Master for rotational grazing advice based on plants, stand, and quality while improving the property's soil health.

In the long term, they state the consultation provided assistance through a mentor to reference while venturing into new soil health directions and grazing methodology.

Figure 4. Participant B's Highland cattle. Left one wearing an invisible fencing GPS collar. May 2024.

Figure 5. Radishes, greens (left), and carrots under row cover (right) in Participant C's seasonal high tunnel/hoop house. November 2024.

Participant C utilized the Magic Marketing Machine, a marketing strategy service, to purchase an email audit for analyzing customer subscriber interaction.

They cited that it was helpful in getting the operation organized. They also mentioned other resources such as Good Roots for bookkeeping and accounting and Glacial Drift Enterprises in helping both farmers on the operation choose new tractor equipment that they weren't experts on.

Discussion & Conclusion

Challenges

By surveying four small, sustainable farmers around the state of Iowa, this study determined that major challenges they all experience center around:

- Reasonable investment of time and labor in their operation.
- Easing the high financial cost of running their operation.
- Accessing specialized training and consultation on business operations.

A small farmer's first five years is the time their operation is most likely to exit production before the 40-year mark (13). All four participants' operations are within this initial window, and it is notable that one of the four was unable to continue farming on their operation. Although Participant D was in a more unique land use situation than the other participants, attributes of their operation align with established studies on farm survival and failure referenced earlier, where growing most of their produce for an intermediary entity and being a farmer in a marginalized social group, as well as being in the second growing season on the operation all may have influenced the exit from farming.

Participant D specifically cites the causes for leaving as a lack of labor, dependence on sales that were not direct to customers, and general lack of support while experiencing overwhelming difficulties. This instance highlights how detrimental these challenges can be to an operation and how essential it is for these farms to have stable and clear access to land and more than one dependable worker outside of occasional volunteers to help ease the burden of labor.

Opportunities

Major opportunities for improvement and reinforcing success are found in the general increase in demand and business traffic in direct to customer and wholesale operations. Where local demand for their produce is exceeding small operations' capacity to produce, a suitable way to accommodate this growth is funding to expand the operation physically or improve production efficiency. Even though large commodity operations receive the majority of federal benefits, direct payments from agricultural programs still contribute to small farms' growth, as it is found that they are more likely to continue operation if they receive some funding. (7;10). The results of this study align with other agricultural research in observing how upfront financial investments positively impact the conditions and outlooks of these small-scale, sustainable farms (16)**.** The use of the stipend from this project for specialized consultation and equipment is an example of this. Once operational costs are covered in a way that generates profit, the

remaining participants reinvested in their operation and became more efficient, increasing their chances of operating their farms for the long term.

Because they are already established on land, the participants' skills in a practical sense were already at a high level, where further growth and development is dependent on the attention to specific services and advanced skills tailored to their operational needs. This information is relevant to organizations, like SILT, who support producers. By knowing the next barriers farmers are likely to face, land trusts and other interested parties can help point them towards solutions. They could use their network to connect farmers to interested farm workers who need experience, for example, to ease the labor burden that the participants experience. The SARE organization does more than just research as well, as they have provided funding for outreach, training, and support for existing community level agriculture programs. Along with their publicly accessible database to projects nationwide, organizations that serve small farmers can be effective in bridging gaps utilizing the specific findings and resources SARE provides.

Conclusion & Next Steps

In conducting a needs-based assessment of four small-scale, sustainable farmers, SILT identified that action reinforcing farmers' strengths is required to improve the future of Iowa's local food systems. This research indicates that once land access is secured, farmers like these participants possess the skills and commitment needed to succeed, but remain constrained by labor shortages, financial risk, climate uncertainty, and limited access to specialized business and infrastructure support. Farm failure can be caused by a unique combination of these challenges and is often situational to the nature of a farmer's operation and background. At a minimum, targeted investments and technical assistance provided by the USDA, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, land trusts, extension services, and conservation-focused organizations, can ease these pressures by providing upfront financial support, advanced training, and tailored consultation at critical stages of farm development.

Further research should be conducted in a way that replicates this study with more farmers in other locales. Future findings will either solidify that the challenges and opportunities identified here are common or illuminate differences and assess why they came about. Utilizing the findings of this study alone, many projects aimed at supporting farmers can be organized. One potential direction could have the objective of creating a centralized, regularly updated online database of funding programs, grants, and support services within the state of Iowa. Another future research direction could strengthen

programs that already exist, inquiring about where farmers currently find their volunteers and employees and improve upon the process. Similar work is being done via the Practical Farmers of Iowa's Find A Farmer and Labor4Learning programs, but the project could be conducted by any local agricultural organization.

Ultimately, when farmers are supported beyond land acquisitions they reinvest in their operations, strengthen local economies, and expand access to healthy, locally produced food. Provided with these opportunities, Iowa farmers on small operations using sustainable practices can build a more resilient agricultural landscape where working farms remain productive and provide localized food systems that ensure rural and urban communities alike prosper.

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 2023-38640-39573 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number ONC24-140. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy.

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