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Understanding Non-Operating Farm Landowners



LARRY LINDELL/STOCKPHOTO

The health of American farmland depends on our ability to reach **all** farm landowners. We don't know enough about non-operating landowners and how to help them steward their land.

JENNIFER FILIPIAK
AFT'S MIDWEST DIRECTOR

A new survey will provide knowledge about the non-operating private landowners who own 31 percent of the nation's farmland and rangeland.

Farmers and ranchers own and operate about 61 percent of U.S. agricultural land. The remaining 39 percent is owned by individuals who rent their land to farmers. Most of the rented land—80 percent—is owned by non-operating landowners. That private land shelters much of our nation's water, soil, and wildlife, while playing an important role in the fight against climate change. But gaps in our knowledge about America's non-operating landowners prevent us from doing all we can to promote conservation practices that protect critical natural resources.

A Need for New Knowledge

We know surprisingly little about the nearly two million “non-operating landowners” who own about 31 percent of all U.S. farmland. In some parts of the country, places like central Illinois, over 70 percent of farmland is rented. Only one recent national survey of this population has been conducted. The USDA Tenure Ownership and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL) survey gives us critical information about who owns farmland and rangeland but was not able to delve deeply into how landowners make management decisions or the resources they need to make informed decisions. Non-operating landowners are a diverse group, including retired farmers, farm widows, and family members who inherited farms. Many are generations removed from farming the land—but they care just as much about its stewardship.



RON NICHOLS/USDA

Changes in land ownership pose social, environmental, and economic challenges—for non-operating landowners and the farmers who work their land.

DR. PEGGY PETRZELKA
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR

However, the dynamic between non-operating landowners and farmer-tenants presents challenges for conservation. A long-term investment in soil health is in the best interests of both landowner and farmer, but practices that promote soil health, like conservation tillage and cover crops, require time and farm management changes before the benefits of more productive soils and greater profits are realized. Farmers interested in these longer-term practices may be discouraged by short-term leases that disincentivize shared investments and risk taking.

At the same time, many non-operating landowners are unfamiliar with conservation practices or have difficulty discussing long-term goals with their renters. One survey found that 65 percent of non-operating landowners rely on their farm operator or someone else to make decisions on conservation practices. This dynamic can lead to a lack of investment in practices that improve productivity and resiliency of the land. Some of the areas with the highest rates of rental agricultural land are also those experiencing high rates of soil erosion and nutrient losses.

A Survey of Non-Operating Landowners

Profound changes in the landscape are on the horizon—over the next 20 years, about 371 million acres of farmland (41 percent of all American farmland) are expected to change hands as aging farmers retire and women and non-farming landowners increase in numbers.

Despite their growing importance, we know very little about non-operating landowners and how best to reach, engage, and motivate them. To address this, AF'T developed and tested a new national survey of non-operating landowners with feedback from staff at the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Survey. We launched the survey in 2018. Using what we learn, we will tailor education and outreach to non-operating landowners, especially the growing demographic of women landowners, to improve long-term conservation on rented lands.



NINA SHANNON/ISTOCKPHOTO



LANCE CHEUNG/USDA



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The goals of the survey are:

- Learn more about non-operating landowners in general (age, gender, proximity to their land, familiarity with farming)
- Identify ways to overcome barriers to resource management decision-making, including for women non-operating landowners who rent their land
- Gain information on what non-operating landowners intend to do with their land in the future
- Increase understanding of how non-operating landowners make decisions about protecting their land
- Help policy-makers, natural resource agencies, and conservation groups understand how best to work with non-operating landowners to achieve effective resource conservation

The potential for positive change is great. After this survey, we will better understand the many factors hindering conservation on rented lands, including the short-term nature of leases, the absence of landowners in conservation decisions, ineffective communications, insufficient soil health metrics, and an inability to share the cost or risk of investments. By better understanding farm landlords and their tenants, we will develop new solutions to overcome these barriers.



LYNN BETTS/USDA

My long-term goal is for my land to be farmed more sustainably.

**NON-OPERATING
LANDOWNER**



ALEX STOPY/STOCKPHOTO



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About American Farmland Trust

For over 35 years, American Farmland Trust's mission 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. The non-operating landowner survey is a project of **AFT's Women for the Land initiative**, which empowers women landowners to conserve their land.

Learn More

Visit www.farmland.org/initiatives/womenlandowners or contact **Jennifer Filipiak**, AFT's Midwest Director, at jfilipiak@farmland.org or (515) 868-1331.