

The Future of Agriculture in York County

A community-based program to address the needs and future of farming in York County, sponsored by Penn State Cooperative Extension and the York County Agribusiness Council

Executive Summary

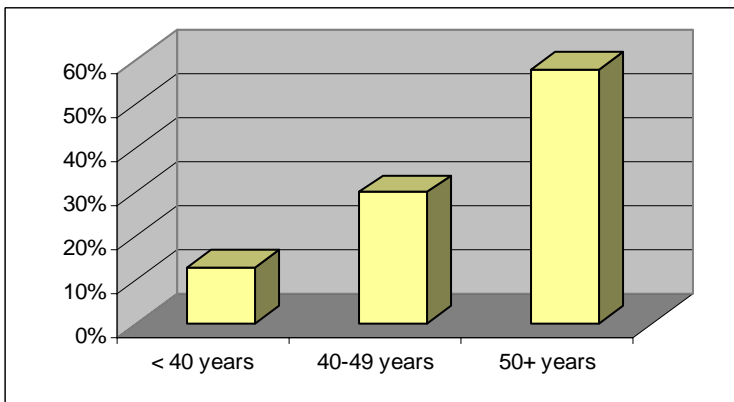
The Future of Agriculture in York County is a program designed to bring community members together to understand and address the challenges facing agriculture in York County. The goal of the program is to help the community identify concerns and barriers to survival and growth facing local farms, and then develop and implement a community-based action plan for sustaining farms and farming in the county.

The first steps undertaken by this group of people were “Let’s Talk” sessions where public meetings were held for farmers to share and discuss the issues, challenges and opportunities that they face. These discussions served to develop the survey questions that the group generated and used to interview a randomly selected subset of York County farmers. Volunteers from the community went out in teams of two to interview these farmers. The survey results were then compiled and analyzed by University faculty.

The Future of Agriculture in York County program yielded a group of over 42 citizen volunteers that talked with York County farmers about their concerns, their needs, and insights about what could and should be done to help agriculture prosper in the future. These volunteers successfully interviewed 66 of the 106 York County farmers they attempted to contact. Taking into account the 40 people who declined to participate in the survey, the effective response rate was 62 percent (66 completed /106 possible).

Who is the York County Farmer?

Figure 1: Age of Farmer



Demographics

Approximately 58% of the respondents were 50 years of age or older while only 13% were under the age of forty. The average age of farmers in this survey was 54 years. This value is only slightly higher than the average age of the principal operator (52.8 years) recorded for York County in the 2002 Census of Agriculture.

According to the statistics collected, 89% of the people interviewed considered themselves the owner/operator of the farm. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of farms in the county maintain “family” ownership. Ninety-eight percent of the farms surveyed indicated that the farm was family or individual-owned, a family partnership, or a family-owned corporation.

Figure 2: Structure of Farm Ownership

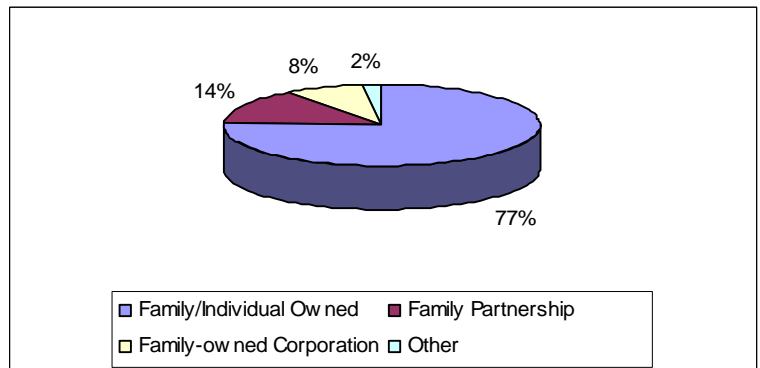


Figure 3: Number of Years Farm has been in Family

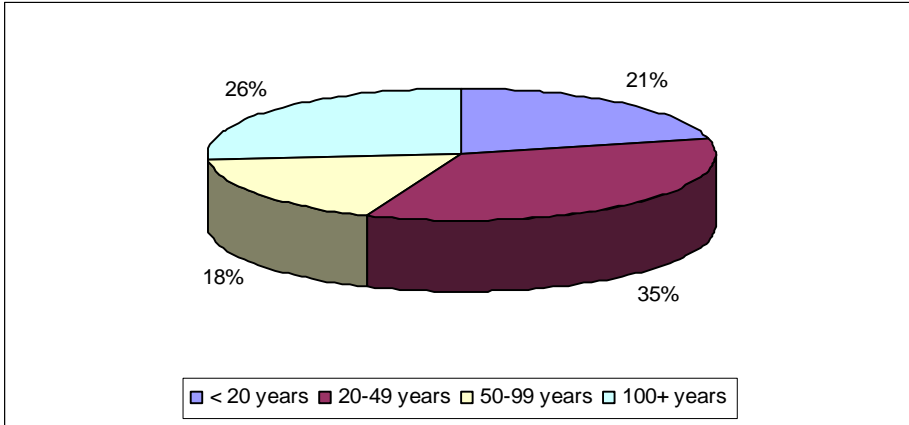


Figure 3 depicts the scenario of keeping the farm business in the family. Twenty-six percent of farms in York County have been in the family for 100 years or more. The average length of time for a farm to have been kept in the family was 61 years. For two of the farms in the survey, the farm had been in the family for over 200 years.

Figure 4: Main Crops Grown in York County

Farm Operation

Although a wide variety of crops are grown within the county, the top four crops as indicated by farmers were corn, hay, wheat and soybeans (see Figure 4). Corn was the number one crop with 68% of the farmers producing corn.

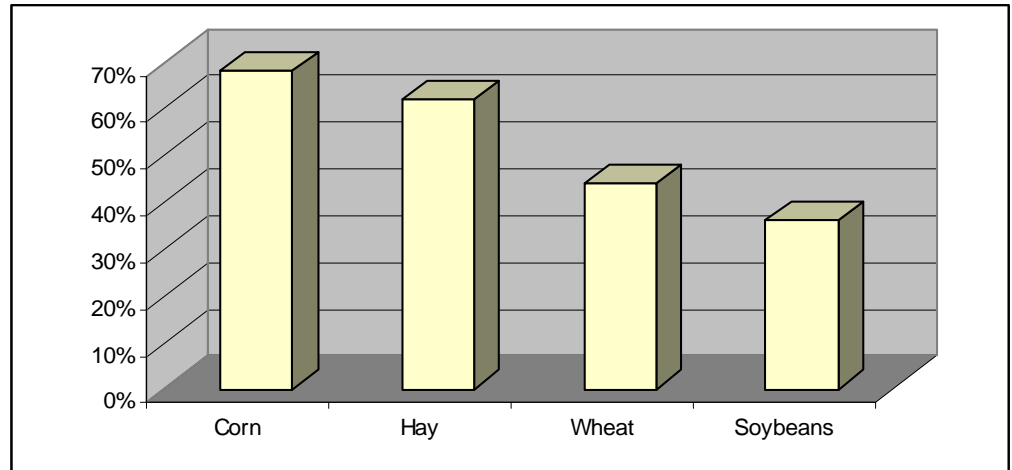
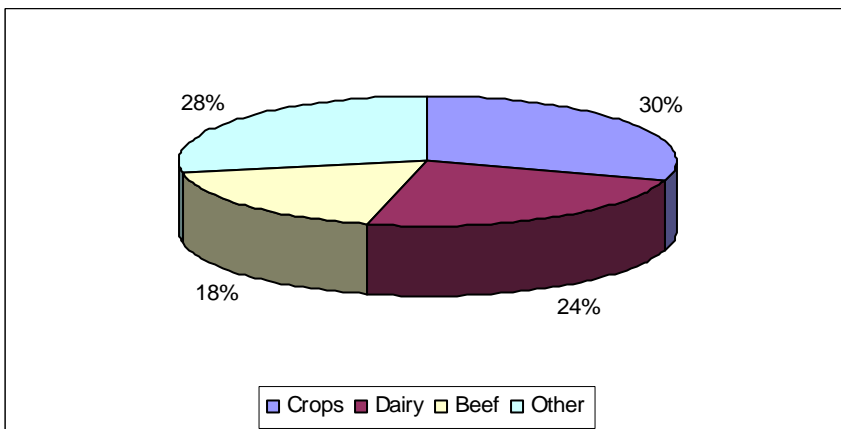


Figure 5: Farm Production by Gross Farm Income

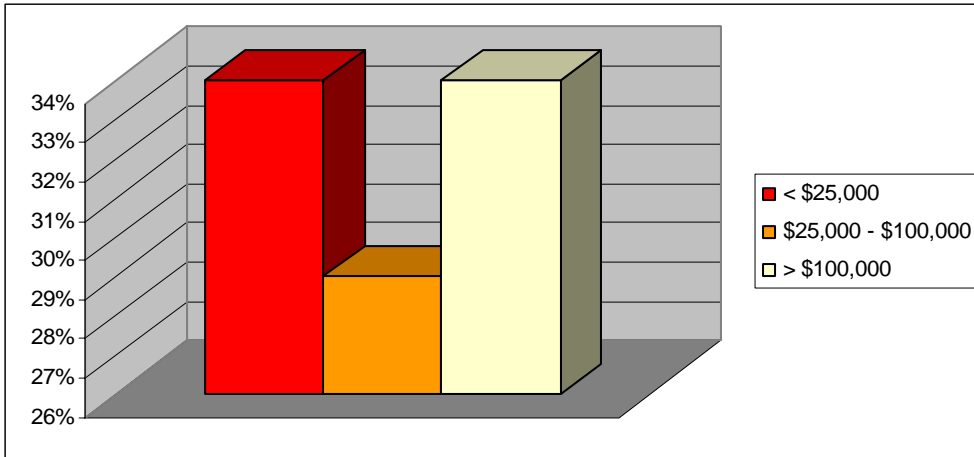


Economic Structure of Farm

As seen in Figure 5, the product that generated the majority of gross farm income for farmers was crops, stated by 30% of the farmers surveyed. Dairy (24%) and beef (18%) were a close second and third.

45% of the farmers in the County generate approximately \$25,000 to \$99,999 in gross farm sales from crops annually. For 35% of the farmers interviewed, crops generated less than \$25,000 a year in gross farm sales.

Figure 6: Gross Farm Sales



The figure depicting gross farm sales (Figure 6) illustrates that approximately 34% of farms are experiencing gross farm sales of less than \$25,000. There are also a significant number of farm operations at the upper end of gross farm sales.

Approximately 34% of the farms surveyed had gross farm sales of greater than \$100,000.

There are relatively fewer farms in the middle, with only 29% of farms with gross sales in the \$25,000 to \$100,000 range. This is a trend that is being seen in York County as well as in other parts of the United States.

Figure 7: Percentage of Household Income from Farm Operation

For 57% of the farms surveyed, the data indicate that less than 50% of the household's annual income is coming from the farm operation. This translates to a growing trend for farmers to have a second job, usually an off-farm job, which generates a second income for the individual or family.

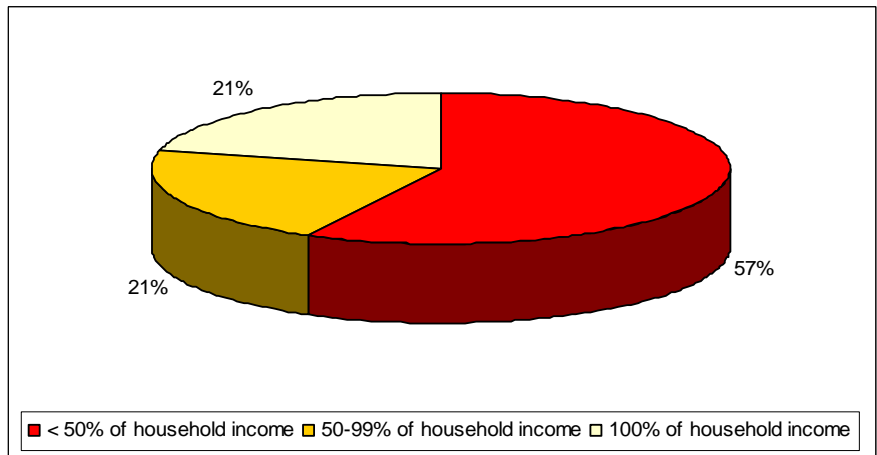
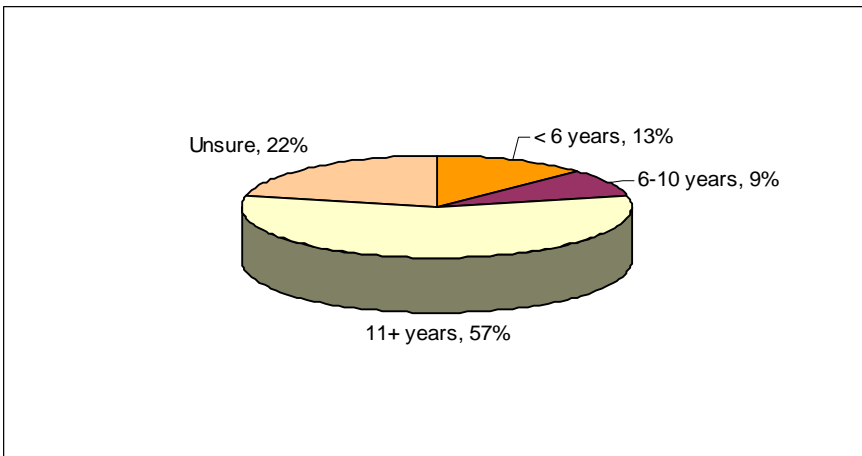


Figure 8: Plans to Continue Farming



In addition to this information, 57% of farmers interviewed indicated that they would continue farming their land for another 11 years or more. In spite of that large number, 22% were uncertain about how long they would continue to farm, indicating an uncertainty about farm succession.

The Strategic Planning and Implementation Process

After the survey results were compiled by University staff, several meetings were then attended by community members to study the survey results and develop community priorities. The York County Task Force identified six different priorities:

- Education of Non-farmers about Agriculture
- Education of Farmers about Opportunities
- Farm Community Cohesiveness
- Risks to Profitability
- Marketing
- Age/Farm Succession

As the group met to discuss the survey results, these six different priorities became clear areas of importance to the farmers interviewed. These six priorities are discussed below in detail. From these six areas, the group then chose “high-priority” goals. Two areas were selected to be the initial focus for action teams that will work together with the community to achieve goals set forth among the group. These two areas were “Education of Non-farmers about Agriculture” and “Education of Farmers about Opportunities.” The group decided that the remaining four priority areas could be addressed, at least in part, under the two “education” areas, as well serve as future areas of emphasis.

A Summary of the Six Priorities Based on the Survey Results

Limited public understanding about agriculture	89%
An increasing number of non-farm neighbors	85%
Conflicts with non-farm neighbors	75%

Priority Issue: Education of the Non-farm Community

A concern that came up time and time again in the focus groups as well as in the surveys was the concept that farmers and their non-farm neighbors have different answers to the question, “What is farming?”

Farmers perceive actions taken by the public, either directly or indirectly, to limit their ability to farm as a significant threat. An overwhelming

majority of farmers (89%) felt that there exists a limited public understanding about agriculture. Coupled with this concern, 85% of farmers also feel threatened by the increasing number of non-farm neighbors. The Future of Agriculture team felt that these differences in opinions and attitudes are a key issue that needs to be addressed in York County. One goal of this team is to develop educational materials that will aid in educating the community about the value of agriculture. Another goal is to put together programs and materials that will allow speakers to further educate public officials about agriculture, enabling them to make well informed land use planning decisions. The group is currently working on bolstering efforts for this year’s Farm Tour as well as using this Executive Summary as an initial basis for a Speaker’s Bureau.

Figure 9: Farmers’ optimism about the economic outlook for agriculture in York County

Priority Issue: Education of Farmers about Opportunities

As seen in Figure 9, 46% of farmers surveyed tend to be pessimistic about the economic outlook for agriculture in the county. For this reason, the Future of Agriculture action teams felt that they could provide some assistance that might change the outlook for farmers.

The survey results suggested that farmers would like to know more about opportunities that might help them to improve their operations and increase their incomes.

One of the questions in the survey asked farmers which alternative farming practices, marketing options, or practices they might be interested in learning more about. Listed in Table 2 are the responses farmers seemed most interested in learning more about. Purchasing and Marketing Cooperatives were at the top of the list.

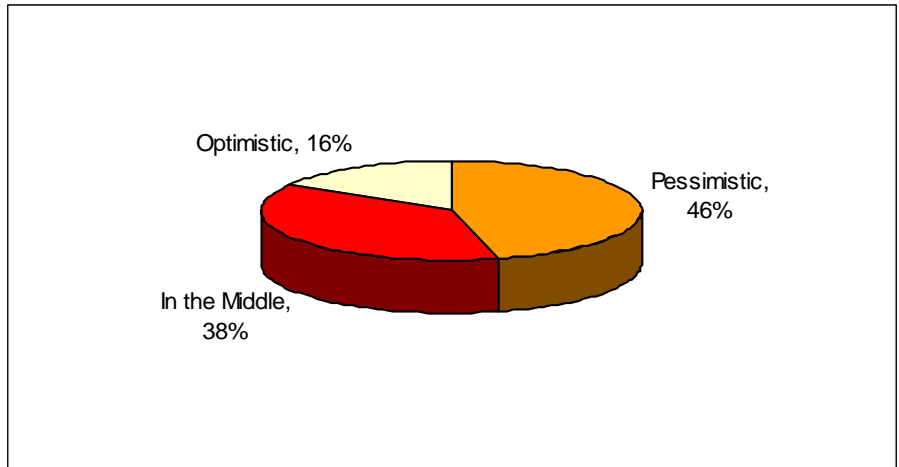


Table 2: Interest in Alternative Farming or Marketing Options

Purchasing Cooperatives	32%
Marketing Cooperatives	30%
Direct Marketing	26%
Contracting with someone else to grow crops or livestock for you	24%
Organic Production	20%
Value-added Cooperatives	15%

Purchasing Cooperatives would allow farmers to join together to buy a certain good or input in volume at a lower price than they would be able to buy individually. A Marketing Cooperative would allow the farmers to combine their livestock or produce to sell to a buyer that they wouldn’t necessarily be able to sell to as an individual farmer.

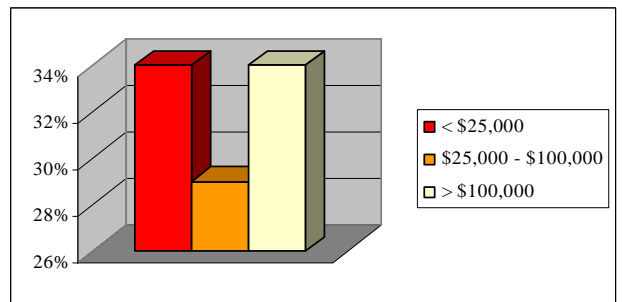
Cooperatives are designed to help farmers strengthen bargaining power, maintain access to competitive markets, capitalize on new market opportunities, obtain needed products and services on a competitive basis, improve income opportunities, reduce costs, and manage risk.

Potential priority areas have been identified by the action team and include, but are not limited to, educating farmers about better management practices, availability of financing opportunities, and regulations. The team has also identified the need to find better ways for farmers to communicate with local government officials such as township supervisors and zoning boards. The creation of a farmer-to-farmer speaker’s bureau is also a project goal for the action team. This type of group would allow farmers to regularly discuss problems they are facing as well as share opportunities with each other.

Priority Issue: Farm Community Cohesiveness

A continual theme from the “Let’s Talk” sessions was a lack of cohesiveness between small and large farm operations. As seen in Figure 6, the number of mid-size farms is decreasing. Focus groups expressed a need for all sizes of agricultural operations to work together more cohesively. This need, in part, is being addressed by the Action Teams educating farmers about operations outside of their own and promoting best practices in agriculture.

Figure 6: Gross Farm Sales



Property taxes	48%
Availability of farmland	46%
Availability of health insurance	29%
General level of understanding about ag	28%
Zoning	25%
Neighbors views and support of ag	23%
Availability of markets	21%

Priority Issue: Risks to Profitability

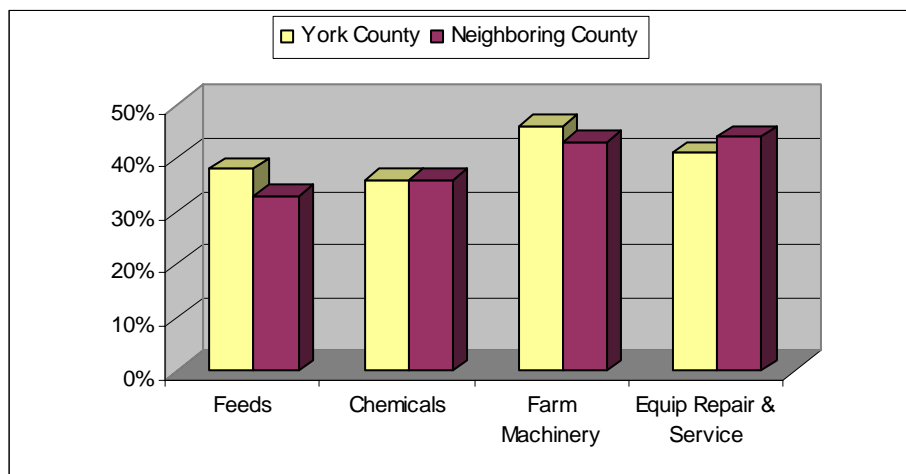
Risks to profitability are varied and vast for most businesses, and the situation is no different for farmers located in York County. As part of the survey, farmers were asked to indicate which factors were most critical to their farm operation. Table 3 shows that increasing property taxes were sited as the number one factor critical to the farm operation. The availability of farmland was second on the list.

As seen in Table 4, thirty-three percent of all farmers surveyed indicated that they had difficulty finding land to rent while dairy and beef producers seem to have the most difficult time finding land to rent. Fifty percent of dairy and beef producers indicated this was a problem they faced.

The Future of Agriculture group felt that many of the risks to profitability could be addressed through efforts to educate farmers about opportunities. In addition, farmer focus groups expressed the concern for availability of affordable land to rent due to the high competition for land in the county. The lack of availability of affordable health insurance was also vocalized.

Difficulty finding land to rent	33%
Lack access to markets	24%
Difficulty finding employees	19%

Figure 10: Location of Farm Supplies and Marketing



Priority Issue: Marketing

Good marketing strategies tie into the sustainability and profitability of the farm operation. Figure 10 indicates a positive infrastructure for agriculture in York County. Inputs required for agricultural operations are generally readily available within the county and region. The challenge depicted by the figure is that approximately half of the inputs listed are purchased in a neighboring county. These statistics also forecast

possible future agricultural infrastructure scenarios that may impact agriculture. If these businesses were to relocate outside of the region, farmers here in York would have a difficult time getting the inputs they need.

Table 5: Farmers' Thoughts			
	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
York County should create and support a "Grown in York County" label to promote locally grown products	79%	14%	6%
I would consider selling development rights to this land	60%	12%	15%
York County should issue a bond to raise money for ag land preservation	58%	18%	17%
Development should be restricted to land with access to sewer service	66%	8%	21%
We have a long range plan for the future of this farm	68%	23%	4%

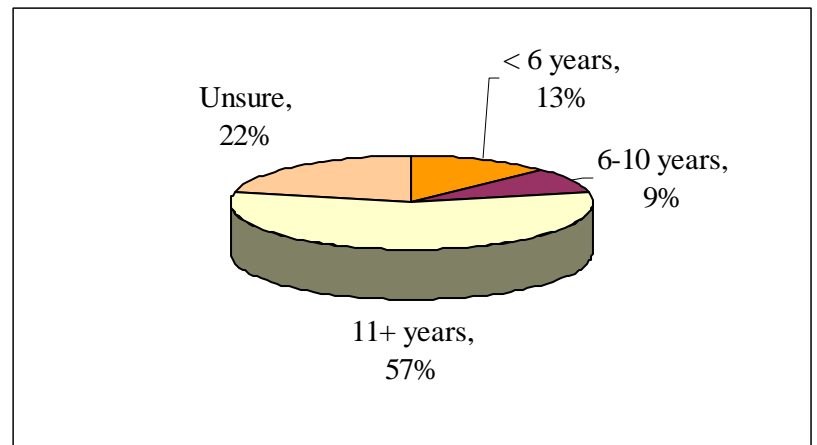
Eighty percent of York County farmers felt that they have adequate access to markets for their farm product. These markets, however, might not be the most profitable arena for farmers. An exploration of new marketing opportunities and strategies might be a future step necessary by the Future of Agriculture action teams.

As illustrated in Table 5, seventy-nine percent of farmers interviewed also indicated that they felt a "Grown in York County" label should be created as a way to promote and market locally grown food products.

Priority Issue: Age/Farm Succession

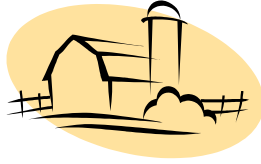
Farm succession's relevance is highlighted by 22% of farms surveyed being unsure how long they would continue to farm and another 22% planning to farm less than 10 years (see Figure 8). The aging population of farmers is also relevant. Of the farmers aged 65 and older who responded to the survey, 43% of them indicated that they planned to discontinue farming within the next five years.

Figure 8: Plans to Continue Farming



Sixty-eight percent of the farmers surveyed (see Table 5) indicated that they had some type of long-range plan for the future of their farm. For larger farms (gross sales greater than \$250,000), 83% of farmers surveyed planned to continue farming beyond the next 10 years.

The Education of Farmers action team recognizes that information about farm succession is a priority issue for farm families and impacts the future of York County's agricultural landscape.



How Can You Get Involved?

The action teams are always looking for more volunteers and leadership from the community. It is not too late to get involved in this dynamic process. The groups are currently working to include farms, agribusinesses and other organizations in this process.

“Education of Farmers about Opportunities”

Repeatedly in the survey results, farmers indicated that they were interested in keeping more of the consumer dollar on the farm. They are interested in learning about ways to improve their operations and increase their income. The team addressing this priority is focusing their current efforts on:

- Identifying existing resources
- Identifying missing resources
- Investigate the creation of a volunteer farmer advisory board
- Form a farmer-to-farmer speakers’ bureau to address opportunities and build agricultural community cohesiveness.

“Education of Non-farmers about Agriculture”

As a result of survey findings and comments made by farmers, educating the public about local agriculture is a necessary piece to the future survival and growth of York County farms. There are two teams addressing this priority. Team 1 is developing educational tools that can be used to disseminate the survey results to the public. Bolstering support for the York County Farm Tour is the task of Team 2. The team will pull community resources to develop information to educate farm tour visitors.

The other four priorities (**Farm Community Cohesiveness, Risks to Profitability, Marketing, and Age/Farm Succession**) will be addressed as they may apply to the two “high-priority” areas or in future efforts as leadership for these projects is identified.

You may contact any of the following members of action teams for more information about how you can participate in the on-going efforts:

“Education of Non-farmers about Agriculture”

Executive Summary & Presentation Team

Facilitator: Bruce Miller

Phone: 717.792.2641

Farm Tour Enhancement Team

Facilitator: Pat Sueck

Phone: 717.862.3486

“Education of Farmers about Opportunities”

Education of Farmers about Opportunities Team

Facilitator: Kristina Wilt

Phone: 717.993.0287