



# Non-Operator Landowner Survey



## ILLINOIS RESULTS

Little data exists on the millions of Americans who own and lease agricultural land but do not farm it themselves—people we call “non-operator landowners” or NOLs. American Farmland Trust’s mission is to protect farmland, promote sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. We cannot meet our mission without engaging this critical group of agricultural landowners. We have also found that NOLs are keenly interested in stewarding their land well, even if they aren’t farming it themselves.

In 2018, AFT began surveying NOLs across the country to increase our knowledge and understanding of how to serve this audience better. This fact sheet presents select survey findings for Illinois. For more information on the survey and our methodology go to [farmland.org/nolssurvey](http://farmland.org/nolssurvey). This survey is a project of AFT’s Women for the Land Initiative. For more information about the WFL program, check out our website [farmland.org/women](http://farmland.org/women).

### SELECT FINDINGS: LANDOWNERS

The landowners who responded to our Illinois survey tend to be



**senior**

**69**

AVERAGE AGE



with **past experience**  
operating a farm

**32%**

HAVE FARMED

**31%**

HELPED PARENTS FARM



**non-resident**  
on the land they rent out

**72%**



but living **nearby**

**22 miles**

MEDIAN DISTANCE AWAY



## SELECT FINDINGS: LAND

Generally, the landowners surveyed



**own**  
a median of  
**120**  
ACRES



of which  
they **rent** out  
**90**  
ACRES



use their land primarily for  
**crop** production  
**97%**



have  
owned the land for  
**decades**



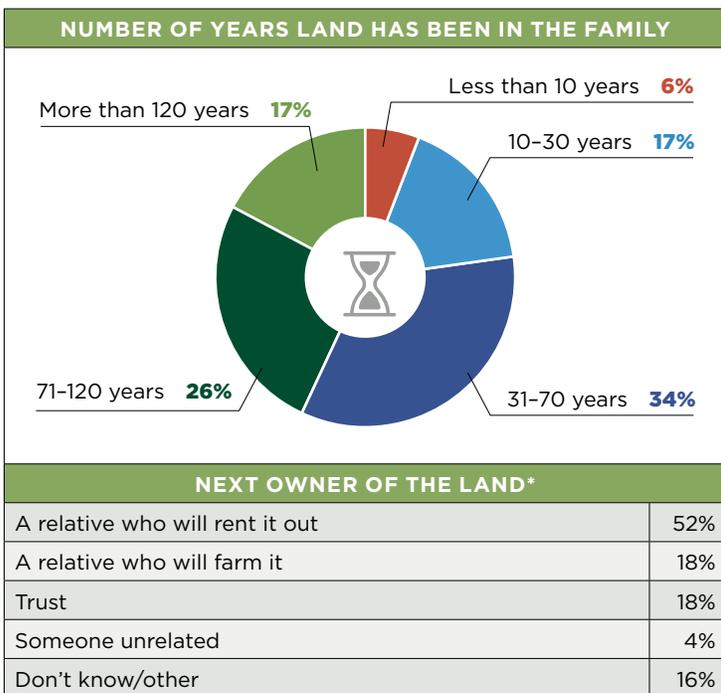
and are likely to  
keep the land in  
**family hands**

**Table 1. Key Landowner Stats**

FINANCIAL IMPORTANCE OF FARMLAND TO HOUSEHOLD*	
Immediate income and a primary source of household income	16%
Immediate income but not a primary source of household income	62%
Long-term real estate investment	33%
Estate-planning tool	22%

\* Could select multiple categories, thus results will not equal 100%

**Table 2. Key Land Tenure Stats**



\* Could select multiple categories, thus results will not equal 100%

In Illinois, we surveyed 385 non-operator landowners. We aimed to survey both men and women who own 25 acres of farmland or more. A primary goal of our research is to understand better the differences in the needs of male and female landowners, so we sampled men and women equally. We also eliminated trusts from our sample because of the difficulty of identifying the primary decision-maker to survey, and the inability to differentiate trusts by gender. This undoubtedly affected the results of our survey—one cannot determine the actual gender split in landownership from our data, and readers should keep in mind that we only surveyed individually- or partnership-owned lands, not institutions or trusts.

The majority (44%) of landowners rent their land to neighbors or friends of the family, while 34% rent to a relative or family member, and the rest (22%) rent to someone who is not related nor a friend of the family. Interestingly, the majority (64%) of lease agreements are verbal and most are a crop share agreement (62%). Additionally, landlords have typically been renting their land to the same operator for a long time, with the median length of time being 15 years, representing long-lasting relationships between landowners and renters.

When evaluating their renter (current or potential), respondents were asked to consider a series of attributes that are somewhat or very important to them. Within the survey, a large number of attributes associated with their renter, including their trustworthiness to their reputation and their conservation philosophy and priorities were included. The six qualities that were most frequently cited as “somewhat” or “very” important appear in Table 3. (See the full list at [farmland.org/nolssurvey](http://farmland.org/nolssurvey).)

For information sources, those responding to our survey trust their farmer first and foremost for information. They are primarily interested in receiving information and/or technical assistance on soil erosion control and soil fertility improvement. (Table 4)



## SELECT FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP WITH FARMER

Generally, the landowners surveyed



**Table 3. Qualities Most Frequently Cited as “Somewhat Important” or “Very Important” when Evaluating Current or Potential Farm Operators**

MOST IMPORTANT OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS	
Trustworthiness	98%
They care about my land	98%
They are financially responsible	98%
Ability to maintain soil productivity	98%
Reputation as a good farmer	96%
Ability to avoid soil erosion	96%

**Table 4. Sources & Needs for Information on Conservation**

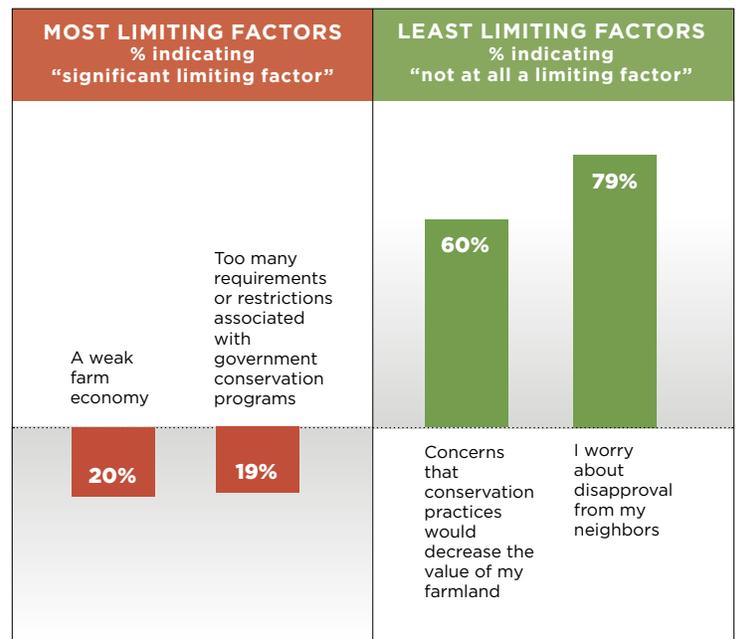
MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF CONSERVATION INFORMATION	
My farm operator/lessee	77%
Local County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD)	62%
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	54%
State Department of Natural Resources	49%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN RECEIVING INFORMATION AND/OR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	
Soil erosion control	37%
Soil fertility improvement	37%
Government conservation programs	33%
Water quality improvement	33%
% INDICATING INTEREST IN INTERVENTIONS (TOP 3 CHOICES)	
Having access to educational materials developed expressly for non-operating landowners like you	34%
Having access to leasing tools that better account for costs, benefits and timeliness of implementing conservation practices	27%
Working with a government agency in providing conservation services targeted to non-operating landowners	18%

Illinois NOLs were asked about 21 potential barriers to conservation that focused on economic (e.g. farm economy, profitability of farm, cost of practice); social (e.g. neighbors, no one else doing it); and knowledge factors (e.g. availability of information, lack of knowledge on my part, lack of knowledge on my farmer’s part). (Table 5)

While Illinois NOLs in our survey saw a weak farm economy as their biggest barriers, very few worried about disapproval from their neighbors or that conservation practices would decrease the value of their farmland.

Illinois NOLs were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with 14 statements focused on land management and their lease. (Table 6) All statements that received 50% or more

**Table 5. Barriers to Conservation on Their Rented Land**





NOLs agreeing are included here. The responses show that the respondents trust their operators and are comfortable changing the lease terms to include conservation practices.

**Table 6. Perceptions on Owner-Leaser Relationship**

I trust my operator to make good conservation decisions.	91%
I am committed to my operator's continuation as a renter of my land.	88%
I am comfortable asking my operator to use certain conservation practices on my land.	81%
I am comfortable extending the length of my operator's lease to facilitate implementation of conservation practices on my land.	82%
I am comfortable asking my operator to amend or make an addendum to our lease requiring conservation practices.	66%
I would be willing to include lease provisions relating to specific conservation practices (e.g. grassed waterways, no-till, adaptive nutrient management, cover crops, filter strips and wildlife habitat).	54%
I would be willing to include a lease provision that requires my operator to implement soil erosion control practices to conserve/improve soil health.	54%

Illinois NOLs were also provided with 11 statements focused on factors they consider when making land management decisions, and they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with them (Table 7). All statements that received 50% or more NOLs agreeing are included here. The responses show a diversity of considerations are important to the landowner, including the environment, economics, their farm operator, the importance of keeping the land in farming, and local landowners and their community.

**Table 7. Factors Considered when Making Management Decisions (Level of Agreement)**

Soil quality	90%
Keeping land in farming	90%
Needs of the farm operator leasing my land	89%
Need for income from the land	88%
Future generations of my family	80%
Water quality	75%
The neighboring landowners	68%
Wildlife habitats	66%
The surrounding community(ies)	57%
Endangered species	54%

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**CONCLUSION**

These findings and others from the survey can begin to help policy-makers, natural resource agencies, and conservation groups understand how best to work with non-operating landowners to achieve more effective resource management of rented lands. In terms of the most important action items for Illinois, the results suggest:

1. There is a **high level of trust** in the farm operator, and **willingness to make changes** to the lease, which may be an entry point for the operator to discuss with the landowner longer term leases to allow implementation of conservation practices, such as cover crops, that take longer than a year to pay off economically.
2. The high level of landowner's willingness to make changes to the lease with their farm operator in various ways that incorporate **conservation practices**, combined with the importance of soil quality to the landowner is another entry point for beginning conversations about lease changes that benefit both parties.
3. The desire by landowners to **keep the farmland in farming** reveals the symbolic importance of the land, and provides a third entry point for conversations about the beneficial impacts of conservation practices on land for future family generations.

**American Farmland Trust**

For nearly 40 years, the mission of American Farmland Trust 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.

Visit [farmland.org/women](http://farmland.org/women) or contact Gabrielle Roesch-McNally, Women for the Land Director, at [groeschmcnally@farmland.org](mailto:groeschmcnally@farmland.org) or **(360) 631-8489**.

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