

**THE OHIO FARMER / OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
SURVEY OF ATTITUDES ON THE STATE OF OHIO FARMING**

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October 1986

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The authors thank Dennis Henderson, Allan Lines, Scott Irwin, Todd Seidel and Andrew Stevens for their assistance. Deep appreciation is extended to Pam Brown for editorial and typing service.

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During the 1980s, agriculture has seldom been off the front pages of the nation's newspapers. Reflecting this national concern, numerous surveys have been conducted of both the farm and non-farm communities concerning various farm issues. Most have been directed toward either farm policy or financial stress. While respondents to this survey were asked about their attitudes on farm financial stress, they were also asked about such subjects as farming as a way of life, price and nutrition as a factor in food demand, and the effect of output-increasing technology on farmer well-being.

The survey was conducted at the 1986 Ohio Farm Science Review by The Ohio Farmer magazine and the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, The Ohio State University. A total of 985 useable surveys were collected. Results are presented in the accompanying table and discussed below. The survey was not a random sample; therefore, the results cannot be extended beyond the respondents to a wider population. The responses do, however, provide an indication of how one group views the current state of Ohio farming.

**Respondents**

A majority of respondents fell in the 35-49 and 50-64 age categories. Seventy-seven percent reported living on farms, with the largest proportion living on farms with farm sales less than \$40,000. Only six percent were two or more generations removed from the farm. Full-time farm operators accounted for 21% of the sample; part-time farm operators, 36%; and respondents who were not farm operators, 28%. Twenty-two percent of respondents worked for a business

which buys from or sells to farmers. Lastly, 98% of the respondents were from Ohio, with the most commonly mentioned counties being Franklin, Madison and Clark.

Of those who classified themselves as farm operators, 53% lived on farms with sales under \$40,000, 26% on farms with sales of \$40,000 - 100,000, and 21% on farms with sales over \$100,000. According to the 1982 Agricultural Census, 76% of Ohio farm operators sold less than \$40,000 in farm products; 14% sold \$40,000 - \$99,999; and 10% sold \$100,000 or more. Thus, as is common in surveys, operators of larger farms were over-represented relative to the census population.

### **Financial Situation and Outlook**

Sixty-eight percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that farmers currently enjoy as good an economic standard of living as other Ohioans. On the other hand, one-fifth agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

A noticeable difference in responses was found when respondents were analyzed by farm operator status. Sixty-two percent of respondents who were not farm operators disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement compared with 69% and 79% for part-time and full-time farm operators respectively. Thus, as dependence on farming increased, the negative view on the current financial status of farmers relative to other Ohioans increased.

Respondents were substantially less pessimistic about the future of farming than about the present situation. Specifically, 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed that farming has a bright future (versus 68%). However, the respondents were only slightly more optimistic about the future than the present (24% vs. 21%), where optimism is defined as agree and strongly agree.

The same relationship existed between farm operator status and views on the future as between farm operator status and views on the present situation. The share who disagreed or strongly disagreed that farming has a bright future ranged from 35% for those who were not farm operators to 43% for full-time farm operators. Another finding was that the youngest respondents were substantially more likely to be optimistic about the future. Specifically, 48% of those under 20 felt that farming has a bright future versus 22% for other respondents. This difference could reflect the rapid decline in land values, which has substantially reduced the cost of getting started in farming. The youngest respondents may see the mid-to-late 1980s as a good time to begin farming.

Combining responses to these two questions reveals that 10% of respondents were optimistic about the future and felt that at present farmers were at least as well off as other Ohioans. Those who were optimistic about the future but felt that current conditions for farmers were worse than those for other Ohioans totalled 11%. Those who felt that farmers enjoy as good a standard of living as other Ohioans now but were pessimistic about the future equalled 5%. Lastly, those who felt that farmers' current economic standard of living is lower than that of other Ohioans and were pessimistic about the future totalled 32%. Thus, about one-third of the respondents feel that farmers are not as well off and probably will not be as well off as other Ohioans in the future.

#### **Farming As A Way Of Life**

Respondents were asked "Is farming more a way of life than a business?" To this question, 57% either agreed or strongly agreed. On the other hand, 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed. There were few (9%) who had no feelings on this issue. A major difference in responses occurred by farm operator status. Sixty-three percent of those who were not farm operators agreed or strongly

agreed with this question, compared with 54% of part-time farm operators, and 47% of full-time operators. Therefore, the more a respondent depended on farming for a livelihood, the less likely the respondent viewed farming as more a way of life than a business.

Continuing along this line, those who lived on farms with sales over \$100,000 were almost evenly split on this question between agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree (48% vs. 47%). For the other respondents, the agree/strongly agree response share was 59% vs. 31% for disagree/strongly disagree. Thus, the largest farm operators were more likely to view farming as more a business than a way of life, although about half take the opposite view.

In the most overwhelming response, 95% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the farm provides a better environment in which to raise children than other locations. The survey also asked whether there was little difference between the problems faced by rural and urban communities, a statement with which 69% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. On both questions, there were few differences among the various characteristics of respondents.

In 1983-84, 79% of Ohio farm family income came off the farm. However, 78% of the respondents believed that farm families should not have to supplement farm income with off-farm income to earn an acceptable standard of living. The only substantial difference among characteristics was by farm operator status. The proportion of respondents who were not farm operators that agreed or strongly agreed with this statement was 70%, compared with 78% for part-time farmers and 86% for full-time farmers. Thus, while there was substantial agreement that farmers should not have to work off the farm, support for this view became stronger the greater the dependence on farming. Lastly, those who agreed or strongly agreed with the view that farm families should not have to

work off the farm were more likely to be pessimistic about the future of agriculture than were those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (42% vs. 33%). Therefore, some of the pessimism about the future may be related to the belief/observation that more farmers will probably find it increasingly necessary to work off the farm in the future.

#### **Demand for Food**

Fifty-eight percent of respondents rated both price and nutrition as major considerations in buying food, i.e., they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that price (nutrition) was a major consideration in buying food. Four percent rated price as a major consideration, but nutrition not as a major consideration, i.e. they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement on nutrition. Three percent indicated that neither was a major consideration. Lastly, 19% listed nutrition as a major consideration and price not as a major consideration. This latter group can broadly be classified as price insensitive and, therefore, willing to pay higher prices for what in their opinion are quality considerations.

#### **Miscellaneous**

Sixty-eight percent of survey participants agreed that farmers should do more to minimize the environmental damage from farming, and there were few differences by any of the characteristics. Eighty-six percent of respondents also indicated that American farmers are the most efficient producers of corn, soybeans and wheat in the world. However, current evidence suggests that American farmers are not the most efficient producers of corn, soybeans and wheat in the world, but only one of several most efficient producers.

The effect of output-increasing technology on the well-being of farmers has become a major issue because of current surpluses and the potential biotechnology holds for increasing production. Full-time farmers were significantly

less in agreement with the statement that output-increasing technology improves the well-being of farmers than either part-time farmers or respondents who were not farm operators (43%, 51% and 56% respectively). This result is not surprising. Full-time farmers are more dependent on farming for a living and see the adoption of technology by other farmers as increasing supplies and lowering prices, thereby reducing profits from farming and lowering their standard of living. In contrast, the other respondents probably see lower prices as translating into lower supermarket prices, thereby improving their standard of living. Along the same line, 63% of those respondents who identified themselves as working for a business which sells to or buys from farmers considered output-increasing technology as improving the well-being of farmers. This compares against 48% for those who did not work for such businesses. Once again, the difference in attitudes can probably be attributed in part to self-interest.

During the lifetime of all respondents, farming has undergone a tremendous technological revolution. There are few, if any, reasons for believing that the technological revolution will not continue. Of those individuals who agreed or strongly agreed that output-increasing technology improves farmer well-being, 30% were optimistic about the future of farming while 35% were pessimistic. In contrast, of those individuals who disagreed or strongly disagreed that output-increasing technology improves farmer well-being, only 17% were optimistic about the future, whereas 50% were negative. Thus, the belief about the role of technology in improving the well-being of farmers is related to whether a person is optimistic or pessimistic about the future of farming.

### **Summary**

The overwhelming majority of respondents to this survey on the state of Ohio farming (68%) believed that Ohio farmers currently do not enjoy as good an economic standard of living as other Ohioans. They are less pessimistic about the future, but nonetheless 40% still believe that farming does not have a bright future. Pessimism was more prevalent among full-time farm operators. Pessimism about the future of farming was related to the views that farmers should not have to work off the farm and that output-increasing technology does not improve farmer well-being. Respondents, however, overwhelmingly viewed farming as a favorable way of life. Lastly, the finding that a substantial share (19%) of survey respondents put nutritional quality ahead of price in buying food suggests that creative marketing tailored to this audience may provide one avenue for a more optimistic future for Ohio farmers.



## OPINIONS ON OHIO FARMING

SA - Strongly Agree; A - Agree; U - Undecided; D - Disagree;  
SD - Strongly Disagree; NR - No Response

SA	A	U	D	SD	NR	
Percent*						
4	17	10	38	30	1	Farmers currently enjoy as good an economic standard of living as other Ohioians.
61	34	3	2	-	-	A farm provides a better environment in which to raise children than other locations.
5	19	37	28	12	-	Farming has a bright future.
19	38	9	24	9	1	Farming is more a way of life than a business.
3	15	13	42	27	-	There is little difference between the problems faced by rural and urban communities.
37	41	9	8	4	-	Farm families should not have to supplement farm income with off-farm income to earn an acceptable standard of living.
15	53	18	10	3	1	Farmers should do more to minimize environmental damage from farming.
17	50	8	21	3	1	Price is a major consideration in choosing food I buy.
23	59	10	7	1	-	Nutrition is a major consideration in choosing food I buy.
9	40	25	18	6	2	Output-increasing technology improves the well-being of farmers.
48	40	6	3	2	1	The American farmer is the most efficient producer of corn, soybeans and wheat in the world.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

AGE:	<u>7%</u>	under 20	<u>30%</u>	50-64
	<u>17%</u>	20-34	<u>18%</u>	65 or over
	<u>27%</u>	35-49	<u>1%</u>	No response
BACKGROUND:	<u>15%</u>	Live on a farm with over \$100,000 gross farm sales.		
	<u>20%</u>	Live on a farm with \$40,000 - \$100,000 gross farm sales.		
	<u>42%</u>	Live on a farm with less than \$40,000 gross farm sales.		
	<u>12%</u>	One or both parents lived on a farm but I do not live on a farm.		
	<u>6%</u>	Neither parents nor I lived on a farm.		
	<u>5%</u>	No response		
	<u>21%</u>	Full-time Farm Operator	<u>36%</u>	Part-time Farm Operator
	<u>28%</u>	Not Farm Operator	<u>15%</u>	No Answer/Couldn't Be Classified
	<u>22%</u>	Work for a business which buys from or sells to farmers. (NR - 12%)		

\* Based on 985 respondents.