Social and Environmental Dimensions of Rented Land in Iowa: Producer Perspectives

Ownership of and access to land are critical determinants of the social, economic and environmental outcomes of farming. Perhaps more than in any other sector, in agriculture control over land is the dominant factor that both shapes the life chances of farmers and the ways in which land is used. In sectors such as manufacturing, the raw materials at the heart of production processes can be sourced from across the globe, and different materials can be substituted for one another in times of relative scarcity. In agriculture, there is a finite amount of arable land available in a given geographic area; if farmers do not have access to land within a certain radius of their homes, their ability to farm is curtailed. Thus, land tenure, whether established through ownership or leasing arrangements, is a critical precondition to success in farming. Access is particularly important for smaller-scale and beginning farm operations. Smaller farms must spread costs over fewer acres, resulting in smaller margins for unexpected occurrences or expenses. For the small and medium size farmer, secure tenure and ability to access enough rental land can make the difference between business success or failure. For beginning farmers, who rent a disproportionately large percentage of the land that they farm, access is an even more critical issue.

Tenure can also play a major role in determining the potential environmental impact of farming. Research has consistently shown that the implementation of conservation practices—especially those with longer-term benefit horizons—is positively associated with ownership. As the proportion of land that is rented increases, so does the importance of working to ensure that the environmental performance of agricultural activities on that land is adequate.

Despite the large and growing percentage of farmland that is owned by non-operator landowners, very little is known about this group. This presentation draws on data from the 2008 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll to examine operator-landlord relations, operator perspectives on their landlords’ conservation ethics, and decision-making responsibility regarding conservation. Specific areas that the presentation will cover include:

- Beginning farmer reliance on rented land,
- Landlord location of residence in relation to their land,
- Landlord connection to farming,
- Landlord-tenant social relations, and
- Landlord-tenant production and conservation decision making.

Results indicate that on the whole, Iowa farm operators and their landlords have long-term, durable relationships and communicate frequently about both production and conservation. Tenants also believe that their landlords have strong land stewardship ethics. Taken together, results suggest that both tenants and landlords would be open to strategies that more explicitly and effectively embed social and environmental criteria into leasing agreements and decision making.