ii. Executive Summary

**The research.** This research report addresses farm and ranch access, tenure, succession and stewardship in the U.S. The FarmLASTS Project researchers investigated how farms and ranches are acquired and held by farm entrants, and how new land tenure and transfer approaches can improve opportunities for farm viability and land stewardship.

The research objectives for the project were to investigate and evaluate:

1. Farm entry through traditional and non-traditional land tenure arrangements;
2. Farmland succession planning and execution strategies; and
3. Environmental impacts associated with farmland tenure and succession arrangements.

The report emphasizes successful and new approaches and models to address the challenges identified by researchers, field informants, focus groups, case study interviewees and participants at a national conference sponsored by the project. Public policy, programming and research recommendations were generated. For a detailed summary of research findings and recommendations, see Section V.

**The findings.**

U.S. agriculture faces significant challenges regarding how farms and ranches are acquired, held, transferred and managed for conservation. Over the next twenty years about 70% of the nation’s private farm and ranchland will change hands, and up to 25% of farmers and ranchers will retire. Two-thirds of the nation’s farm and ranch asset wealth is held in real estate; farm real estate values more than doubled from 2002-2008. Women, absentee and non-farming landlords are increasing. Cost, competition and availability of land (and often housing) are major challenges for most beginning farmers. Fewer entrants acquire farms from family members and more entrants come from non-farm backgrounds. Socially disadvantaged populations face additional challenges acquiring farmland.

Given the weighty financial and emotional considerations, older farmers often resist developing farm succession plans. Studies show that over two-thirds of retiring farmers do not have identified successors and nearly 90% of farm owners neither had an exit strategy nor knew how to develop one. Transfer of management is often overlooked as a key element in succession planning, and often farm families don’t know where to turn for help or can’t find it.
Under the right conditions, renting farmland can offer beginning farmers a flexible, lower-cost alternative to purchasing land. However, short-term cash leases—the increasingly dominant rental type—create uncertainty for farm entrants and discourage conservation. Innovative tenancy models like longer-term leases with environmental stipulations hold promise for increasing both security and conservation. Landowner education, social norms and tenure agreements affect operators’ conservation practices and investments. Public and institutional landowners can play key roles in making property available and demonstrating new models for acquisition and stewardship.

**The recommendations.**

For a resilient agriculture, both land ownership and tenancy—under the appropriate conditions—should be accepted and promoted as tenure options. U.S. agriculture policy should foster farm entry and viability by promoting: a) increased opportunity to access to farms and ranches; b) affordable options to acquire land and housing; and c) secure tenure. Farmland owners, especially non-operator landlords, should be educated and encouraged to offer affordable and secure tenure situations that promote conservation, and to actively relate to the land operator.

Public policies should encourage and support the timely transfer of farm businesses and properties in ways that assure a comfortable transition and meaningful legacy for the retiring farmer, and affordable opportunity for the next generation. Farm families should be able to obtain adequate, informed assistance from teams of advisors equipped with the full arsenal of transfer tools and methods. Special attention should be paid to families without farming heirs, the junior generation, women inheritors and socially disadvantaged populations. Policies and programs should reflect the relationship between land tenure, land use and conservation. Tenants and landlords should be encouraged to implement conservation activities on farm and ranch land through a combination of information, education, incentives and removal of social and economic barriers. Lease arrangements that foster longer-term security, equitable sharing of costs of conservation, and landlord engagement should be promoted.