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Rented land: Barriers to sustainable agriculture

M.S. Carolan, D. Mayerfeld, M.M. Bell, and R. Exner

Much US farmland is rented, especially in the Midwest. How does this situation affect the adoption of sustainable agriculture? These authors took a first step in answering that question by examining the social dynamics between landlords, tenants, and agricultural agency professionals in adopting sustainable agriculture methods.

In 2002, 38 percent of US farmland was rented. In the Midwest, typically half or more of farmland was rented. In Iowa, the proportion was 51 percent. Rates were even higher in some other Midwestern states. For example, in Illinois and Indiana, the figures were 62 and 68, respectively. (USDA, 2004; table 40). [[New endnote]]

[[Text of new endnote: We derive these figures in the conventional way, which is to combine the land rented by "part owners" (that is, farmers who own and rent some land) with the land operated by "tenants" (that is, farmers who own none of the land they farm).]]

Given this prominence, it is important to investigate whether the rental of farmland influences the use of sustainable practices. Based on Iowa, this research project examines the social dynamics between landlords, tenants, and

agricultural agency professionals in order to better understand how those dynamics affect the adoption of sustainable agricultural methods on rented land.

There is widespread anecdotal evidence that rented land poses special challenges for the adoption of sustainable agriculture in Iowa (and elsewhere in the Midwest). Sustainable techniques of production, including conservation practices and organic methods, require long-term investments in management and sometimes equipment (Gliessman, 1998). The instability of tenure inherent in rental arrangements, communication issues, and conflicting goals for the land, may lead to difficulties in adoption even when one or both parties in the landlord-farmer relationship wishes to implement sustainable techniques (Netting, 1993).

Several factors promote a short-term, bottom-line approach to farming on rented land. Intense competition in some counties for cropland leads to narrow profit margins as farmers compete with each other to offer the highest rents, particularly in cash-rent situations (Hufferd and Gee, 2000). The increasing trend toward cash-rent in Iowa and elsewhere may be accelerating this tendency.¹ In addition, cash-rent is usually associated with greater turnover among farmers (Pieper and Harl, 2000), mitigating against long-term management investments and the formation of good communication ties between landlords and tenants. Also, the pressure for increased land base, combined with intense competition for rented land, is leading to a situation where an increasing number of farmers are working widely scattered fields—20, 30, or more miles apart. As travel times increase, farmers may feel pressure to adopt less intensive and less sustainable methods.²

In all, there remains little empirical research on the barriers to adopting sustainable agriculture on rented land.³ This is why we designed a three-staged research project consisting of statewide interviews, focus groups, and extensive personal interviews of a single Iowa county.

The process

We began our research by informally interviewing key people across Iowa. These conversations helped to provide analytical focus to develop questions, provides an analytical focus, and provide empirical background for the focus groups that followed. Between July and September of 2000, 29 agricultural professionals were interviewed (See Table 1).

The next stage of the research, we held four focus groups—one involving tenants, one with landlords, and two involving agriculture professionals (Iowa State University Extension personnel, Natural Resources Conservation Service agents, and Department of Natural Resource agents). Seven to 10 individuals participated in each of the one and a half to two hour focus groups.

In the final stage of information gathering, personal interviews were conducted within a single Iowa county. Twenty-eight people were interviewed for this stage of the project—13 tenants, 12 landlords (six tenant-landlord pairs), and three Iowa State University Extension agents. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours.

Summary

The interviews and focus groups captured 11 common themes or barriers to this topic. Table 2 describes the message communicated for each of the 11 barriers to adopting sustainable agriculture on rented land. Judging by the responses given by landlords, tenants, and agriculture professionals, this research appears to have tapped into an issue of great salience for many involved in Iowa agriculture. Consistently, participants remarked about the “timeliness” and “great significance” of this research. In light of these remarks, it’s hoped that future research will continue down this path to further understand the barriers to adopting sustainable farming practices on rented land. As one tenant poignantly stated, “If sustainable agriculture is going to work, it’s got to work first on rented land.”

Sidebar

Table 2. Key themes that emerged from the focus groups, interviews, and follow-up conversations with farmers. The quotations are taken from the interview transcripts.

Self-censorship
<p>Tenants expressed concern about not feeling free to discuss sustainable agriculture practices with their landlord(s) for fear of being labeled a “radical” or “rocking the boat” and thus potentially jeopardizing their future status as tenants. Consequently, there appeared to be a practice of self-censorship (or conflict avoidance) among tenants on issues pertaining to the potential adoption of sustainable agricultural techniques. Such attitudes appeared to greatly dampen the dialogue between landlord and tenant with regard to issues pertaining to sustainable agriculture, and with that any possible adoption of such techniques.</p> <p>This unwillingness to communicate about alternative farm management strategies could likewise indicate a lack of trust between the two parties. As landlord absenteeism increases and as tenants continue to farm land greater distances apart there is less opportunity for tenant-landlord interaction and thus trust building and maintenance. And without this trust the tenant-landlord relationship runs the risk of becoming conflictual and purely profit driven (thus leaving no room for familial, communal, or emotional ties) (Carolan 2004).</p>
<p><i>“We talked a little about things like ridge-till and chemical application in one of our first meetings. I guess he thought I was trying to get at something because he immediately asked, ‘You’re not one of those organic farmers—are you?’ And he didn’t mean it as a compliment. Right then and there I knew that I better just do what he wanted if I wanted to make this relationship work”—tenant</i></p>
Uncertainty
<p>The uncertainty inherent in one-year leasing arrangements inhibited a tenant’s ability, and willingness, to adopt sustainable practices. Given that sustainable agriculture involves long-term farming strategies—such as building up the fertility of the soil naturally without the use of chemicals—long-term leasing arrangements become essential in providing tenants with the necessary security to undertake such practices.⁴ (Leasing arrangements are discussed in greater detail below.)</p>
<p><i>“From the tenant’s standpoint, I’m not going to want to put in hundreds of hours of sweat-equity into soil that I may not have next year. Why should I as a tenant build up soil fertility in land that is not even mine? Just so he can rent it to someone else for more than I’m paying—so that person can benefit from the dirt I built up?—tenant</i></p>
Lack of technical knowledge
<p>Iowa State Extension personnel, and agricultural professionals in general (i.e., seed and fertilizer dealers), were perceived as lacking the technical knowledge needed to make them viable sources of information for sustainable farming. Sustainable agriculture requires knowledge that is not as needed for more conventional agriculture—i.e., knowledge of alternative crops, alternative fertility management, pest ecology, etc. Respondents did not feel that the so-called “experts” were sufficiently knowledgeable in these areas. As one individual stated, “conventional farmers can farm out of a can, organic farmers have to farm with their brains” (referring to industrial agriculture’s dependence on chemical inputs). Such findings are also consistent with earlier research</p>

(Korsching and Malia 1991). It appears sustainable farmers still rely heavily upon each other for information, rather than seeking such information from conventional sources.

“The field specialist here just doesn’t understand sustainable agriculture. He’s the last person I’d go to for information. That’s what is so disappointing. How can ISU be expected to break away from the old ways of farming if its soldiers don’t know the first thing about the new ways? We need special technical information to farm sustainably, and that’s just beyond their reach.”—Tenant

Emphasizing production at the expense of profitability.

Iowa State University Extension was perceived as being too oriented towards issues of production at the expense of profitability (a position that many believed damaged their credibility as leaders in the sustainable agricultural movement). Respondents felt that if less focus were placed on production, farmers and agriculture professionals alike would come to a clearer realization that it simply does not make economic sense to be growing, for example, corn, which cost (approximately) \$2.50 a bushel to produce, only so they can turn around and sell it for \$1.70 to \$1.90 on the market. To quote one respondent, “I can grow 200 bushels of corn an acre, but if I lose 25 cents each bushel, what good does it do me?” If productivity were deemphasized, respondents believed they could more easily “sell” sustainable agriculture to their landlord(s)/tenant(s), for example by showing that input costs would be reduced and that they could qualify for premium prices.

“Just a little while ago we had a field day at [a local farm]. After listening to the corn and soybean guys talk about how to maximize production, I asked the farm management guy where his demonstration was today. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘Well, we learned how to maximize production, but no one talked about profitability.’ ‘Oh, Well, you don’t want to open that can of worms,’ I was told. Well, now maybe we need to open that can of worms. Who cares how many bushels you can produce if you’re going broke doing it. Is it really that much fun to drive big equipment?”—Extension staff

Is sustainable agriculture profitable?

Landlords remained uncertain about the profitability of sustainable agriculture (as do many within agriculture [Hassanein, 1999]). Operators, on the other hand, believed that if they could show their landlord(s) that such practices actually make sound economic sense, they would be more open to the possibility of adoption. Tenants frequently spoke of their desire to be able to access information that compares the profitability of conventional practices to sustainable practices, and thus combat the myth that sustainable agriculture is an unprofitable endeavor.

“I don’t know if farming that way is profitable.”—Landlord

“One thing that I could really use is some hard numbers to show my landlord. To show him that things like rotational grazing and organic farming can be profitable, and maybe even more profitable than conventional methods. I know that if I could show him that, with all the numbers next to each other—so he can see a side-by-side comparison—it could really help my case to farm more sustainably.”—Tenant

Problems with cash-rent leasing arrangements

Cash-rent appeared to be the dominant leasing arrangement among those interviewed. Yet most respondents viewed such a leasing arrangement as largely inhospitable to the adoption of sustainable methods, due to its concentration of risk upon the tenant. Instead,

the majority of tenants expressed a preference for crop-share leasing arrangements, which would spread risk evenly between the landlord and tenant and so provide greater incentive for tenants to “take a chance” on the adoption of sustainable farming techniques.

In a few situations, however, cash renting was actually preferred by both the tenant and landlord. In these instances, it was viewed as preserving the operator’s flexibility while protecting the landowners from concerns about the profitability or marketing of the crops. These respondents also noted that crop-share arrangements can place sustainable farmers at a disadvantage because the shared expenses (fertilizer and pesticides) are those that sustainable farmers use less of, whereas the tenant’s expenses (management, labor, and fuel) are often greater in sustainable farming.⁵ Moreover, cash rent can allay landlord reservations, providing the tenant “breathing room” to implement alternative practices or crop rotations perceived as unprofitable.⁶

In light of these inequities that exist in traditional leasing arrangements, alternative leasing arrangements were also found to be slowly gaining ground. For instance, a landlord who wanted the land in a rotation longer than corn-soybean described a flexible cash-renting arrangement. The landlord and tenant agreed upon a rotation which included hay, and when in hay the cash-rent was reduced by 20 percent (to help compensate for the additional equipment, labor, and management required).⁶

“Sustainable agriculture needs to be a team effort involving both landlord and tenant. If both parties are not involved it’s not going to work. Cash-rent situations are too antagonistic or oppositional. I think the landlord needs to be involved for it to work. Otherwise, you’re going to get those situations where the tenant does all the work, builds up the soil, and then the landlord takes it out from under him and rents it to someone else for ten or twenty dollars more an acre.”—Tenant

Table 2. Key findings continued.

The need to disseminate information

Farmers perceived sustainable agriculture as requiring technical knowledge beyond that needed in a more conventional operation.⁷ Interviewees repeatedly expressed a desire to gain access to such information so as to educate not only themselves about alternative farming methods (and alternative leasing arrangements) but also to educate their landlord(s) or tenant(s) about such practices. Frequently, respondents expressed a desire for information that was already available, however, they did not know such information existed (or how to obtain it). Thus, agricultural institutions and organizations must improve not only in gathering such information, but in making the public aware of its availability and then making it easily accessible.⁸

“I feel a person that farms sustainably really has a lot more knowledge than the chemical farmer. We buy solutions to our problems in the form of a can. Sustainable farmers, however, cannot do that. They have to understand soil types, weeds, insects—you know, a jack-of-all-trades. And that knowledge is not easy to come by. I wish I had better access to it”—tenant

“As a landlord, I want my tenants to farm sustainably. But as long as they remain ignorant as to what that is, they’re not going to do it. That’s what Extension needs to focus more on—making such information [on sustainable agriculture] available to the public.—landlord

An image problem

Iowa State University appears to have a slight image problem for some respondents due to its (perceived) involvement in “big agri-business”, which led respondents to question its commitment to sustainable agriculture in general. To whom was Iowa State University ultimately responsible?—agri-business or the small family farmer? This question was on the minds of many respondents, and several interviewees expressed doubt about the institution’s image as a “leader” in the sustainable agriculture community. This concern about “corporate capture” (i.e., the perceived infiltration of agri-business interests into public agriculture research institutions), however, is widespread (Gray et al., 1997; Hassanein, 1999). In other words, this problem is not Iowa State University’s alone.

“I’m not sure even if we should expect something from Iowa State. I know they’ve come a long way in the past ten years—with the Leopold Center and their work with PFI [Practical Farmers of Iowa]—but you’ve got to look at the bigger picture. Where is their money coming from? From organizations interested in sustainable agriculture?—No, of course not. It’s the Monsanto and Pioneers out there that are pumping the big bucks into Iowa State. And for what? So we can all switch to rotational grazing? I just can’t see how they’re going to be able to break from the grip of these big companies”—tenant

The alienation of female landlords

Female landlords described inequitable power relations between themselves and their male tenants. Specifically, they expressed feelings of exclusion, alienation, a lack of sufficient technical knowledge, and a desire to form networks with other female landlords. Female landlords interested in sustainable agriculture found themselves ill equipped to engage in a knowledgeable dialogue with their male tenants, due to a lack of technical knowledge and the networks to obtain such knowledge. Female respondents consequently expressed a sense of powerlessness and dependency. In short, they felt as though they were “outsiders” to the broader agricultural community (findings consistent with previous research on gender relations within agriculture more generally [i.e., Chiappe and Flora, 1998; Feldman and Welsh, 1995; Hassanein, 1999; Meares, 1997; Peter et al., 2000; and Salamon, 1992]). Women own or co-own approximately 47 percent of all farmland and 51 percent of all rented farmland in Iowa. 31% of leased farmland is jointly owned by husband and wife, meaning women have sole ownership of about 20% of leased farmland (Pieper and Harl, 2000). Slightly less than 7 percent of all “principal operators”—i.e., farmers— in Iowa are women, according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture (USDA, 2002). Nation-wide in 1999 women had sole ownership of about 27% and joint ownership of about 48% of leased farmland (USDA, 1999).

“One thing I think women landowners would like to see is recognition that they’re a growing and important segment of Iowa agriculture. From the women I’ve talked to, many feel that there is no place for them—for information and consultation or just so they can talk to other women landlords. Men have their corn growers’ and cattlemen’s’ association, but what do women landowners have that are similar?—female landlord

Cultural pressures

There are still strong social pressures in rural America that equate a weedy field with a bad farmer (Bell, 2004; Coughenour and Chamala, 2000). Tenants overwhelmingly reported that landlords wanted a “neat and tidy” appearance to the land. Tenants were therefore wary of reducing pesticide use through banding or other techniques out of concern that such action might result in an

appearance of weediness. Many landowners were far removed from the land, making communication with the producer and with Extension and NRCS staff more challenging. Moreover, the relative invisibility of sustainable agricultural benefits (it is hard to “see” lower rates of soil and nutrient loss, improved soil structure, higher levels of beneficial soil micro-organisms, and the like) means that the improvements sustainable management makes to the land may not be readily apparent to the landlord. These factors help explain why sustainable producers often reported feeling constrained to farm more conventionally than they would like on their rented land, despite the relative autonomy reportedly granted to tenants in farm operation decision-making (Constance et al., 1996; Gilbert and Beckley, 1993; Salamon, 1992).

“There’s a lot of pressure to keep the corners of the field trimmed and the rows clean. You never know when your landlord is going to go for a little drive to look at his fields. A generation ago, you could tell a lot about a farmer by the way his rows looked, but I don’t think the same holds true for today.”—tenant

Sustainable agriculture viewed positively

Interestingly, all respondents spoke positively of sustainable agriculture. This is an encouraging finding. The negative stigma that previously accompanied such practices (i.e., Korsching and Malia 1991) appears to be waning. It appears that sustainable agriculture *per se* does not have an image problem. The barriers, rather, reside in other areas—such as concerns about profitability, a lack of technical knowledge to make such practices work, and other broader cultural pressures. This would suggest that the barriers keeping some individuals from adopting sustainable methods could be overcome by providing those individuals with adequate knowledge and information about sustainable agriculture’s profitability and the necessary technical knowledge to make such practices work.

“Sustainable agriculture’s great, if you can get it to work.”—tenant

“I don’t have a problem with sustainable agriculture. But I’m a businessman; I go for what makes money. Now, if sustainable ag. could be made profitable—great. But until then, I’m going with what will pay the bills.”—tenant

⁴ In agriculture, uncertainty can be closely associated with risk (Carolan, 1999; Strange, 1988). Given the risky nature of agriculture, producers are often unwilling to engage in additional risky behaviors. In fact, producers frequently seek out management strategies to reduce risk (i.e., farm subsidy programs, diversification, and off-farm employment) (Carolan, 1999; Strange, 1988). In terms of our findings, then, perhaps respondents under a one-year lease viewed not adopting sustainable methods as just such a risk management strategy.

⁵ These latter points, where cash rent was actually preferred, came out of later follow-up discussions with landowners and tenants (Mayerfeld et al., 2003).

⁶ This example also comes from later follow-up interviews (Mayerfeld et al., 2003).

⁷ This specialized knowledge is often referred to in the literature as “local knowledge” (i.e., Clark and Murdoch, 1997).

⁸ This may also be another instance of self-censorship; in this case it is Extension professionals concerned that advocating sustainable practices will undermine their credibility with farmers. Unfortunately, we did not think to investigate this possibility, so it remains a question for future study.

Endnotes

¹ According to Pieper and Harl (2000), cash-rent leasing in Iowa has increased from 48.8 percent of all leasing arrangements in 1982, to 54.2 percent in 1992, to 57.1 percent in 1997, while crop share arrangements in Iowa have decreased from 48.8 percent in 1982, to 44 percent in 1992, to 38.8 percent in 1997. In December 2003 cash rent arrangements accounted for 73% of farmland leases in Iowa, while crop share leases had declined to 24% (Duffy et al., 2004).

² While research has yet to examine the relationship between travel times and the adoption of low-management farming practices, Carolan (1999) found a negative relationship between time constraints and the adoption of sustainable farming practices.

³ This is not to say that research has ignored tenant-landlord relationships in agriculture (i.e., Constance et al., 1996; Gilbert and Beckley, 1993; Rogers and Vandeman, 1993). Such literature, however, fails to examine those relationships in terms of their effects on the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices on rented land.

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Table 1. Stage one interviews were conducted with 29 individuals. Below are the groups the individuals represented.

Group represented	Number of participants
Farm managers	3
Iowa State University Extension field specialists and county directors	8
Iowa Department of Natural Resources	2
Natural Resources Conservation Service agents and district conservationists	3
Tenants	7
Landlords	6