Small Farmers in the West: Profiling a Growing Segment

THE ISSUE

Although we know a great deal about agriculture’s contribution to the economy and its challenges, we know much less about the changing make-up of small farm operators and their characteristics. This project surveyed small farmers about their demographics, preferences for learning methodologies, greatest threats, and information demands. The project will aid in the identification of new Extension clientele and their learning preferences.

The rural West has experienced dramatic demographic and economic transformations in the past decade. As both commercial and small agriculture changes, so must the education and resource delivery channels.

Owner Profile

-80% of the operators belong in the age group 45-64
-80% are white males (77% of primary operators) and well educated
-On average they have lived 10 years on property
-On average they have lived 11 years in the community
-For 16% of the operators, the primary residence is not located on the property. The average distance between the two is 79 miles
-On average, the property headquarters is 25 miles away from the nearest metro area
-61 percent indicated that less than 20% of their household income comes from agricultural sales
-Two thirds of the respondents (622) reported having gross farm and ranch sales of less than $50,000 in 2005

Educational Background

-17% have some college
-15% have a high school degree
-17% have a graduate degree

Location of Property

-40% live in the meadow
-15% have open land
-45% have high elevation

Early Farming Income

-40% of respondents reported raising livestock for sale or personal use
-40% of respondents reported raising crops for sale or personal use
-20% of respondents reported raising both crops and livestock

Crops and Livestock Profile

Small farmers are very likely to have livestock – and it is likely to be cattle. They may also irrigate crops.

-81% of respondents keep animals. About half of animal keepers hold cattle – this is 47% of all respondents.
-The average cattle herd is 39 head.
-The segment that kept horses generally for pleasure or work (i.e. not for sale) was about 20% of the livestock holders or 16% of the surveyed population.
-The average horse herd is 4 head.

Animals Kept

-Irrigated crop production: Small farmers are somewhat likely to have crops: 53% produce crops. The crop is likely to be about 50 acres of hay or 60 acres of alfalfa.
-74% of crop producers irrigate.

Crop/Acreage

-40% of respondents produce corn
-25% of respondents produce sorghum
-15% of respondents produce dry beans
-10% of respondents produce wheat

Grazing Property Hard

Small farmers graze their own property – very few have leases on public property.
-They typically graze pasture 7.5 months a year and leave no or almost no grass left.
-Their pastures have a 50/50 chance of being managed with a pasture management system – if a plan is in place it will likely have 3 pastures.

Purchase Feed

Small farmers purchase most of their animal feed, and typically from a neighbor.
-60% of respondents purchase all of their feed
-40% of respondents purchase some of their feed

Resource Management Profile

-Respondents typically own and manage 40 acre blocks of land and lease little, if any, additional acreage.
-They are not producers of commodities sold in organic or other niche markets.
-Properties are not typically enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).
-Chemicals are often used to control weed problems on these rural properties. However, few property owners hold a chemical applications license.

Water Use

-Water sources on small properties typically include wells and surface water. Respondents reported that surface water is not usually present on lands bordering their properties.
-The majority of respondents do not irrigate their pastures (58%). Of those that do, 10 acres were typically irrigated.

Future Work

This information will help guide content and delivery to reach the small farmer audience. Future work will deepen the analysis of the survey and extend it to resource advisors.

The resource management profile shows that small farmers typically own and manage 40 acre blocks of land and lease little, if any, additional acreage. They are not producers of commodities sold in organic or other niche markets. Their properties are not typically enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Chemicals are often used to control weed problems on these rural properties. However, few property owners hold a chemical applications license. The majority of respondents do not irrigate their pastures (58%). Of those that do, 10 acres were typically irrigated.