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Facing Economic Adversity:

Experiences of Displaced Farm Families in North Dakota

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Highlights

The purpose of this study is to examine the socioeconomic characteristics of North Dakota farm families that have left farming since 1985, to analyze the circumstances of their departure, and to describe their transition to new and, in most cases, different occupations. Comparisons were made among recent survey respondents, respondents to a previous study of former farmers, and current farm operators.

Information concerning characteristics of displaced farm families was obtained from a telephone survey conducted during March 1989. Potential respondents were screened to determine if they (1) had quit operating a farm since 1985 (2) did not plan to operate a farm in 1989, (3) were less than 65 years old when they quit farming, (4) sold at least \$2,500 of farm products in the year prior to ceasing the farm operation, and (5) considered farming to be their main occupation prior to quitting.

A list of 373 farm operators who had quit farming since 1985 for reasons other than retirement was compiled. Of the 253 who were contacted by phone, 151 qualified as former farmers and resulted in 122 useable questionnaires being completed. Some highlights of the results are listed below.

- Recent former farmers apparently have a higher education level compared to respondents of the previous study. Over 20 percent of both the farmers and their spouses had completed a college education compared to 14.4 percent and 8.6 percent of previous former farmer respondents and spouses, respectively.*
- Recent former farmers reported considerably higher net cash farm income than previous former farmers, but still 58 percent less than that of current farm operators. This indicates a continued inability to meet financial obligations at a higher level of profit.*
- Not surprisingly, 83 percent cited financial problems as the reason they quit farming. However, 41 percent said they could have made changes in their operation that would have enabled them to continue farming.*
- Overall, operating loans had decreased on average from the previous survey. The percentage left unpaid to commercial banks and PCAs decreased, but FmHA's share of unpaid dollars increased from 52 percent to 83 percent of the total unpaid debt.*
- Over 60 percent of the respondents reported an average of \$54,378 in intermediate-term loans. The average left unpaid increased from over \$37,000 for previous former farmers to about \$52,000 for recent former farmers. Commercial banks and FmHA had similar shares of total loan dollars with PCAs holding only 7.5 percent.*
- FmHA carried about one-half of the long-term debt reported by recent former farmers. About two-thirds of this debt was left unpaid to FmHA.*
- Fewer respondents indicated the farm situation had "a great deal" of effect on their personal lives compared to the previous former farmer study. This may indicate that some of the social stigma associated with "going broke" has eased.*

- *Over two-thirds of the recent former farmers indicated they were financially better-off at the time of the survey. "Less stress" and "more stability" were reasons cited for better financial well-being. Respondents reported a mean family income of \$36,000, about \$7,000 higher than that reported by previous former farmers.*

Facing Economic Adversity: Experiences of Displaced Farm Families In North Dakota

Timothy L. Mortensen, F. Larry Leistritz,
Brenda L. Ekstrom, and Janet Wanzek*

Economic stress in American agriculture and North Dakota, in particular, has been manifested and documented for nearly a decade.¹ Depressed commodity prices, high interest rates, and reduced asset values earlier in the decade combined with a severe drought in 1988 resulted in extreme financial problems for some farm and ranch operators.

Farm and ranch operators who were forced to cease farming in the early 1980s were younger than average, and nearly one-third of all loans were not paid in full when the farming operation was liquidated (Leistritz et al. 1987b). The characteristics of farm families that ceased farming since 1985 continue to impact not only the affected operators but also agricultural creditors, agribusiness firms, the local trade center, and the public service sector of the communities involved.

The purpose of this study is to examine the socioeconomic characteristics of North Dakota farm families that have left farming since 1985, to analyze the circumstances of their departure, and to describe their transition to new and, in most cases, different occupations. Specific characteristics and issues examined are

1. Demographic characteristics, such as age, education, marital status, household size, and current residence;
2. Farm characteristics, such as acreage operated, principal enterprises, year began farming, and year ceased;
3. Farm financial characteristics, such as levels of debt, assets, and income;
4. Circumstances of exit, including disposition of assets, repayment of debt, and contingent tax liabilities;
5. Circumstances of transition, such as agencies contacted, assistance programs utilized, time required to find employment, and effects of the farm financial situation on their personal lives;
6. Employment characteristics, such as employment status, industry and occupation of respondent and spouse, satisfaction with current employment, and future plans for job search; and
7. Present family well-being, including current income, assets, debt, perception of present financial situation, and satisfaction.

Study Procedures

Information concerning characteristics of displaced farm families was obtained from a telephone survey conducted during March 1989. Potential respondents were screened to determine if they (1) had quit operating a farm since 1985 (2) did not plan

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¹(Johnson et al. 1986; Jolly et al. 1985; Leholm et al. 1985; Murdock et al. 1985; Mckinzie et al. 1987; Ekstrom et al. 1986; Pederson et al. 1985; Leistritz et al. 1987a).

to operate a farm in 1989, (3) were less than 65 years old when they quit farming, (4) sold at least \$2,500 of farm products in the year prior to ceasing the farm operation, and (5) considered farming to be their main occupation prior to quitting.

A list of 373 farm operators who had quit farming since 1985 for reasons other than retirement was compiled. Of the 253 who were contacted by phone, 151 qualified as former farmers and resulted in 122 useable questionnaires being completed. (A copy of the questionnaire is available on request.)

Characteristics of Former Farm Families

The characteristics of former farm operators responding to the survey are summarized in the following section. The summary is organized into seven subsections that describe demographic characteristics, farm and financial characteristics, circumstances of exit and transition, current employment, and family well-being. Results of the recent former farmer survey are presented in conjunction (in most cases) with responses from the previous former farmer survey (Leistritz et al. 1987b) and the recent survey of current farmers (Leistritz et al. 1989).

Demographic Characteristics

Selected demographic characteristics of former farm operators are summarized in Table 1. The average age of the respondents was 41.6 years, about 7 years younger on average than current farmers. About 62 percent were less than age 45. About 95 percent of the respondents were male, and nearly 88 percent were married. The average size of the household was 3.5 persons, slightly less than the results reported in the previous former farmer survey.

Education of both respondents and spouses varied somewhat from previous former farmers. Over 15 percent of the respondents and only 6.4 percent of the spouses had not completed high school. However, a larger percentage of both respondents (21.3 percent) and spouses (20.2 percent) had completed college compared to respondents of the previous former farmer survey. This may indicate that the better-educated farmers have more options in selecting their life's work and are more willing and able to cease farming to pursue other occupations.

A slightly larger percentage (58.2 percent) of respondents stayed in the same county after they quit farming compared to the previous former farmers (55.1 percent). Only about 13 percent of the recent respondents chose to move out-of-state, a number comparable to that of the previous former farmer group.

In general, demographic characteristics are similar between the two groups of former farmers with the exception of education and household size. Compared to current farmers, former farmers are younger, better educated, and have larger households.

Farm Characteristics

Most respondents (64.8 percent) to the recent survey had ceased farming in 1986 or 1987 (Table 2). Nearly one-fourth had begun their farming operation during the 1970-1974 period; over 64 percent started after 1970. The majority of former

TABLE 1. SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH DAKOTA FORMER FARM OPERATORS

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers	Current Farmers ^a
Respondent Age:			
Average age	41.1 yrs	41.6 yrs	49.0 yrs
Distribution:	-----percent-----		
Less than 35 years	29.3	28.7	13.9
35 to 44 years	35.3	36.1	24.2
45 to 54 years	22.2	18.9	22.2
55 to 64 years	13.2	16.4	39.6
Respondent sex:			
Male	95.8	94.9	98.7
Female	4.2	5.1	1.3
Spouse age:			
Average age	38.5 yrs	39.5 yrs	47.0 yrs
Marital status:			
Single	3.6	4.9	8.5
Married	89.8	87.7	89.4
Separated or divorced	6.6	6.6	1.3
Widowed	0.0	0.8	0.9
Household size:	-----number-----		
Average size	3.9	3.5	3.3
Distribution:	-----percent-----		
One	6.0	9.8	5.2
Two	19.9	16.4	33.8
Three	12.7	22.1	20.3
Four	26.5	23.8	16.8
Five or more	20.5	27.9	23.9
Highest level of education completed by respondent:			
Did not complete high school	10.8	15.6	25.2
Completed high school	38.3	29.5	36.1
Attended college or postsecondary school	36.5	33.6	26.5
Completed college	14.4	21.3	12.2
Highest level of education completed by spouse:			
Did not complete high school	5.4	1.0	12.4
Completed high school	41.3	43.3	37.5
Attended college or postsecondary school	44.7	35.6	34.0
Completed college	8.6	20.2	16.1
Present residence of respondent:			
Same county	55.1	58.2	—
Relocated within state	31.7	28.7	—
Out of state	12.6	13.1	—

^aValues for current farmers are for 1988.

TABLE 2. SELECTED FARM CHARACTERISTICS OF PREVIOUS FORMER FARMERS, RECENT FORMER FARMERS, AND CURRENT FARMERS

Item	Previous Former Farmers ^b	Recent Former Farmers	Current Farmers ^a
<hr/>			
	<hr/> percent <hr/>		
Year started farming:			
Before 1945	7.1	4.1	7.3
1945-1949	5.9	2.5	9.7
1950-1954	3.0	5.8	11.1
1955-1959	7.1	3.3	11.4
1960-1964	8.9	9.9	11.1
1965-1969	11.2	9.9	9.8
1970-1974	22.5	24.8	14.8
1975-1979	29.0	19.0	15.7
1980-1984	5.3	19.0	8.9
After 1984	—	1.7	—
Year quit farming:			
1981	3.0	—	—
1982	7.7	—	—
1983	17.2	—	—
1984	26.0	—	—
1985	35.5	13.1	—
1986	10.7	36.1	—
1987	—	28.7	—
1988	—	22.1	—
<hr/>			
	<hr/> number <hr/>		
Total acres operated:			
Mean	1,466.0	1,463.4	1,560.2
Median	1,220.0	1,160.0	—
Acres owned:			
Mean	761.4	741.5	742.6
Median	600.0	500.0	—
Acres rented from others:			
Mean	988.4	806.2	848.2
Median	680.0	539.5	—
<hr/>			
	<hr/> percent <hr/>		
Farm type ^c :			
Crop	57.4	57.3	61.9
Livestock	26.1	24.8	26.8
Mixed	16.6	17.9	11.3
Type of business organization:			
Sole proprietorship	87.0	84.7	—
Partnership	8.9	11.9	—
Family-held corporation	4.1	3.4	—

^aValues for current farmers are for 1988.^bSource: Leistritz et al. 1987b.^cFarms were classified by type if more than 50 percent of gross farm income came from a particular source; farms were classified as diversified if no one source accounted for more than 50 percent of gross farm income.

producers operated predominately crop-oriented (57.3 percent) farms and about one-fourth had livestock operations.

Survey respondents indicated that during their last full year of farm operation, they had operated an average of 1,463 acres or nearly the same as those from the previous survey (Table 2). Recent former farmers reported only about 6.7 percent fewer acres in their operation than current farmers. Respondents owned about 49 percent of the land they operated on average and rented the remainder. So, in respect to farm size and type, former farmers were similar to current farmers.

About 84 percent of the respondents cited financial problems as the primary reason for their exit from farming (Table 3). Although the 1988 drought had only occurred the previous year, 14 percent cited weather as a reason for quitting. About one-half (49 percent) of the respondents indicated they were still involved in farming in some capacity. Most involvement was through the ownership of land (35 percent), 30 percent were employed by another farmer, and about 8 percent had kept some livestock.

Interestingly, 41 percent of the respondents felt that there were changes that they could have made during their last two or three years of farming that would have made it possible for them to remain farming (Table 3). The largest single change cited was reducing capital expenditures (37.6 percent). Other frequently cited changes involved seeking management training (14.0 percent), renegotiating loans (16.3 percent), and operating less land (11.0 percent).

Nearly 53 percent of the respondents indicated they would never return to farming. Equal percentages (12.7 percent) indicated that higher commodity prices, lower interest rates, or a more predictable future would entice them to return to farming.

Financial Characteristics

Recent former farmers were asked to respond to a number of questions regarding their financial condition during their last complete year of farming. Their average gross farm income was \$101,800, essentially the same as for the previous former farmers and about \$14,000 less than current farmers (Table 4). The distribution of gross farm income is similar for the three groups; about 80 percent had gross farm incomes of \$40,000 or over.

Net cash farm income was higher (\$8,901) for recent former farmers than for previous survey respondents (\$ -12,423) but still noticeably less than for farmers currently operating their farms (Table 4). This possibly indicates that the returns from farming have recently improved somewhat but not enough to enable the recent respondents to remain in farming.

The most apparent explanation for farmers ceasing to farm is the debt load they carry. The recent former farmers had a debt-to-asset ratio of 114.9 (technically insolvent) which is down slightly from that reported by the previous respondents but substantially greater than the 49 percent reported by current farmers.

TABLE 3. ISSUES RELATED TO CEASING FARMING OPERATION

	Recent Former Farmers
	- % -
Reasons why quit farming:	
Financial	84.3
Weather	14.0
Health	5.8
Retired	1.7
Other	16.5
Respondent still involved in farming in some way:	
Yes	49.2
In what way involved?	
Still own some land	35.0
Work for another farmer	30.0
Rent-out owned land	26.7
Kept some livestock	8.3
Other	6.5
Could changes have been made to be able to remain in farming?	
Yes	41.0
What were the changes?	
Reduced capital expenditures	32.6
Renegotiated loan for lower interest	16.3
Sought management training	14.0
Operated less land	11.6
Sold land	4.7
Sold livestock	4.7
Bought livestock	4.7
Sought financial counseling	2.3
Operated more land	2.3
Other	14.8
Under what conditions would return to farming?	
Would never return	52.5
Higher commodity prices	12.7
Lower interest rates	12.7
More predictable future	12.7
Win \$1,000,000	5.1
Less government involvement	1.7
Other	21.3

TABLE 4. SELECTED FINANCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH DAKOTA PREVIOUS FORMER FARMERS, AND RECENT FORMER FARMERS DURING LAST COMPLETE YEAR OF FARMING, AND OF CURRENT FARMERS

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers	Current Farmers ^a
Gross cash farm income ^b			
Average	\$101,045	\$101,800	\$115,559
	-----percent-----		
Distribution:			
Less than \$20,000	5.0	6.0	5.5
\$20,000 - \$39,999	14.9	14.0	13.0
\$40,000 - \$99,999	44.1	41.0	40.3
\$100,000 - \$249,999	26.1	31.0	32.1
\$250,000 and over	9.9	8.0	9.1
Net cash farm income ^b			
Average	\$-12,423	\$8,901	\$21,305
	-----percent-----		
Distribution:			
Less than \$-20,000	28.9	13.3	1.6
\$-19,999 - \$-10,000	15.8	5.6	2.4
\$-9,999 - \$0	17.1	25.5	7.2
\$1 - \$9,999	17.1	11.2	22.2
\$10,000 - \$19,999	11.2	13.3	24.8
\$20,000 - \$29,999	5.9	11.1	18.7
\$30,000 and over	4.0	20.0	23.1
Debt-to-asset ratio			
Average	120.8	114.9	49.0
Distribution:			
Less than 40	21.2	19.3	58.9
40 to 70	15.8	12.8	25.4
70 to 100	22.4	27.5	10.0
Over 100	40.6	40.4	5.7
Total assets	\$328,596	\$266,894	\$391,025
Total debts	\$261,488	\$227,260	\$127,284

^aValues for current farmers are for 1988.

^bValues reported on IRS form 1040F.

Loans

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents reported having an operating loan during their last year of farming (Table 5). Over 51 percent of total operating loan dollars was in the form of commercial bank loans that averaged \$46,074. This compares to a

TABLE 5. SOURCE AND UNPAID PORTION OF OPERATING LOANS OF NORTH DAKOTA FARMERS DURING LAST PRODUCTION YEAR

Item	Average Loan	Average Unpaid	Percentage of Operating Loans Unpaid to Source	Percentage of Total Loan Dollars ^a	Percentage of Unpaid Total Dollars	Number	
						Loans	Unpaid Loans
	-----dollars-----		-----percent-----				
Banks							
Recent survey	46,074	13,87	3.5	51.5	7.7	34	4
Previous survey	61,908	26,692	12.3	37.6	21.1	42	12
PCAs							
Recent survey	39,000	65,000	23.8	9.0	9.0	7	1
Previous survey	62,654	32,297	17.4	18.8	14.9	23	7
FmHA							
Recent survey	38,490	29,950	50.2	39.3	83.3	31	20
Previous survey	43,908	31,747	30.1	38.1	52.2	60	25
Other							
Recent survey	6,000	ND	ND	0.2	ND	1	ND
Previous survey	48,500	ND	ND	5.5	ND	8	ND
Average							
Recent survey	43,410 ^b	28,780 ^c					
Previous survey	56,736 ^b	33,779 ^c					
Percentage reporting operating loans = 57.4%				Total number with operating loans:			
Percentage of total loans left unpaid:				Recent survey			
Recent survey				23.7%			
Previous survey				22.0%			
				Previous survey			
				133			
				44			

^aTotal from all sources.

^bAverage indebtedness from all sources for respondent with operating loan debt.

^cAverage indebtedness left unpaid from all sources for respondent with unpaid debt.

ND=not disclosable.

NOTE: 70 respondents had a total of 73 loans.

31.6 percent share from banks for previous former farmers. Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) accounted for over 39 percent of operating loans averaging \$38,490; a percentage similar to that reported in the previous survey. Production Credit Association's (PCAs, now known as Farm Credit Services) share of operating loans for former farmers decreased from 18.8 percent for previous former farmers to 9.0 percent for recent survey respondents. The average loan from PCA also decreased from \$62,654 for previous former farmers to \$39,000 for recent loans. In other words, the average operating loan decreased by about \$23,000 from one survey to the next.

About 24 percent of the farmers were unable to pay their operating obligations in full when they quit farming (Table 5). While commercial banks accounted for over 51 percent of operating loans to former farmers, they recorded only about 8 percent as unpaid (average of \$13,875). This compares to 21 percent unpaid (average of \$26,692) by farmers in the previous survey and may indicate a more cautious and secure approach to lending in recent years. Respondents reported a considerably larger percentage unpaid to FmHA; about 83 percent left loans unpaid or an average of nearly \$30,000. In addition, the average portion unpaid to FmHA was only about \$2,000 less than for previous former farmers. The average unpaid of all operating loans was \$28,780, down about \$5,000 from the average left unpaid for the previous former farmers.

About 61 percent of 122 former farmers had an average of \$54,378 in intermediate-term loans at the time they quit farming (Table 6). This was nearly \$10,000 less on average compared to the former farmers previously surveyed. The average loan from commercial banks and FmHA (\$42,566 and \$61,378, respectively) was down about 25 percent from the previous former farmers. However, the average loan from PCA increased to \$60,520, up from \$45,382.

Nearly 34 percent of intermediate-term loans were left unpaid by the recently surveyed farmers (Table 6). This is nearly twice as much as the total percentage unpaid (18.0%) reported by previous former farmers. Commercial banks accounted for about 47 percent, and FmHA accounted for nearly 52 percent of the total unpaid loans in this category. The average amount left unpaid was \$52,192, up from \$37,594 for previous former farmers.

Over two-thirds of recently surveyed former farmers had borrowed money for long-term purposes (Table 7). The average loan from all sources was \$214,287, down about \$5,000 from that for previous former farmers. Federal Land Bank and FmHA accounted for 32.9 percent and 47.2 percent of the total loan volume, respectively. The average loan from Federal Land Bank was \$186,480, up from the \$168,241 reported in the previous survey. The average loan amount of \$165,932 from FmHA was virtually the same as that reported earlier.

While the average unpaid loan from Federal Land Bank was up about \$23,000 from the earlier survey, the percentage of unpaid total dollars was 18.7 percent, down from the 30.1 percent reported by previous former farmers. FmHA carried the largest portion of unpaid long-term debt (67.3 percent of the total with an average of \$157,666). The overall average of unpaid loans was essentially unchanged at about \$184,000, but the percentage of total loans left unpaid was 44 percent, up from 31.1 percent previously reported.

TABLE 6. SOURCE AND UNPAID PORTION OF INTERMEDIATE-TERM LOANS OF NORTH DAKOTA FARMERS DURING LAST PRODUCTION YEAR

Item	Average Loan	Average Unpaid	Percentage of Intermediate-term Loans Unpaid to Source	Percentage of Total Loan Dollars ^a	Percentage of Unpaid Total Dollars	Number	
						Loans	Unpaid Loans
	-----dollars-----			-----percent-----			
Banks							
Recent survey	42,566	58,63	38.9	41.3	47.5	39	11
Previous survey	60,026	28,548	13.3	44.2	32.5	43	12
PCAs							
Recent survey	60,520	--	--	7.5	--	5	0
Previous survey	45,382	--	--	8.6	--	11	0
FmHA							
Recent survey	61,378	44,035	39.6	44.2	51.9	29	16
Previous survey	80,712	43,118	28.8	35.9	57.4	26	14
Other							
Recent survey	46,795	ND	ND	7.0	ND	6	ND
Previous survey	55,408	ND	ND	11.4	ND	24	ND
Average							
Recent survey	54,378 ^b	52,192 ^c					
Previous survey	64,902 ^b	37,594 ^c					
Percentage reporting intermediate loans =			60.7%	Total number of with intermediate-term loans:			
Percentage of total loans left unpaid:				Recent survey			
Recent survey			33.7%	Previous survey			
Previous survey			18.0%				

^aTotal from all sources.

^bAverage indebtedness from all sources for respondent with intermediate-term loan debt.

^cAverage indebtedness left unpaid from all sources for respondent with unpaid debt.

ND=not disclosable.

NOTE: 74 respondents had a total of 79 loans.

TABLE 7. SOURCE AND UNPAID PORTION OF LONG-TERM LOANS OF NORTH DAKOTA FARMERS DURING LAST PRODUCTION YEAR

Item	Average Loan	Average Unpaid	Percentage of Long-term Loans Unpaid to Source	Percentage of Total Loan Dollars	Percentage of Unpaid Total Dollars ^a	Number		
						Loans	Unpaid Loans	
	-----dollars-----		-----percent-----					
Federal Land Bank								
Recent survey	186,480	180,355	24.9	32.9	18.7	31	8	
Previous survey	168,241	156,991	32.4	28.9	30.1	49	17	
Contract for Deed								
Recent survey	104,089	ND	ND	4.1	ND	7	ND	
Previous survey	141,632	ND	ND	8.0	ND	16	ND	
FmHA								
Recent survey	165,932	157,666	62.7	47.2	67.3	50	33	
Previous survey	165,716	144,721	40.3	45.3	58.8	78	36	
Commercial Banks								
Recent survey	106,205	57,203	26.9	9.7	5.9	16	8	
Previous survey	72,184	77,142	31.4	5.2	5.2	20	6	
Other								
Recent survey	118,147 ^b	184,023 ^c	ND	6.1	ND	9	ND	
Previous survey	144,072 ^b	184,722 ^c	ND	12.6	ND	25	ND	
Average								
Recent survey	214,287	184,023						
Previous survey	219,307	184,722						
Percentage reporting long-term loans =		67.2%	Total number with long-term loans:					
Percentage of total loans left unpaid:			Recent survey				113	39
Recent survey		44.0%	Previous survey				188	59
Previous survey		31.1%						

^aTotal from all sources.

^bAverage indebtedness from all sources for respondent with long-term loan debt.

^cAverage indebtedness left unpaid from all sources for respondent with unpaid debt.

ND=not disclosable.

NOTE: 82 respondents had a total of 43 loans.

The average debt to unsecured creditors was \$16,568, down about \$9,000 from the previous survey (Table 8). The percentage of unsecured debt left unpaid was 68.2 percent or nearly \$12,000, about one-half of what was reported by previous former farmers.

TABLE 8. OUTSTANDING DEBTS WITH UNSECURED CREDITORS OF FORMER NORTH DAKOTA FARMERS

Item	Previous Survey	Recent Survey
Average debt	\$25,653	\$16,568
Average debt left unpaid	\$24,702	\$11,838
Average percentage of total left unpaid	73.9%	68.2%

Disposition of Assets

Respondents were asked how they disposed of their assets when they quit farming. Nearly 60 percent deeded land back to either a financial institution or to an individual (Figure 1). About 25 percent sold land, and over 15 percent disposed of it by either a combination of means or retained all or part of it. By comparison, nearly 27 percent of the previous former farmers had retained their land at the time of the earlier survey. Nearly 87 percent of recent former farmers sold their livestock either publicly or privately; and only 1.6 percent conveyed them to a lender. About 72 percent sold machinery either publicly or privately, and 6.0 percent conveyed to a lender. Nearly 13 percent retained their machinery when they quit farming.

Contingent Tax Liability

Contingent tax liabilities continue to be a concern in farm liquidations (Saxowsky et al. 1987). Selling assets by liquidation can result in the following contingent tax liabilities:

- recapture of investment credits
- recapture of depreciation
- capital gains tax
- income tax arising from debt forgiveness
- other

Over 46 percent of the respondents reported having additional tax liability as a result of ceasing to farm (Table 9). This is up only about four percent from the previous former farmers. Apparently a larger percentage of former farmers are aware of the possibility of additional tax consequences, since only 4.1 percent indicated they did not know if ceasing to farm would result in additional taxes compared to nearly 15 percent of previous former farmers who responded in the same manner.

Respondents reported an average additional tax liability of \$11,707, or slightly more than half the average reported in the previous survey. Over 47 percent had tax liabilities under \$5,000, and over 14 percent had liabilities between \$30,000 and \$39,999. About one-third of the recent former farmers reported that recapture of investment credit and depreciation added to their tax liability, and nearly 70 percent

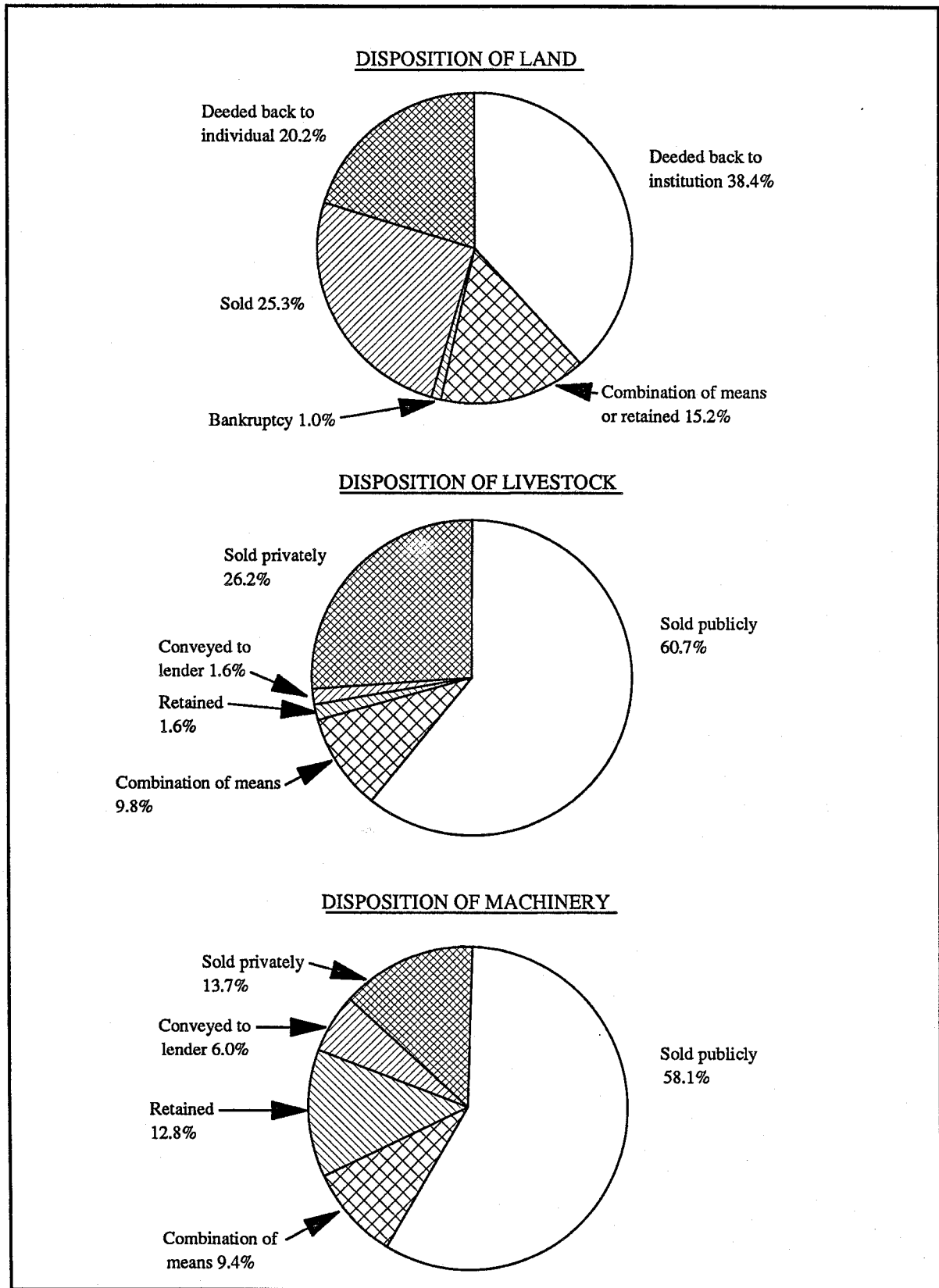


Figure 1. Disposition of Assets After Ceasing to Farm

TABLE 9. BANKRUPTCY STATUS AND CONTINGENT TAX LIABILITIES
OF FORMER NORTH DAKOTA FARMERS

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers
	-----percent-----	
Did ceasing to farm result in additional income tax liabilities?		
No	42.9	49.6
Yes	42.2	46.3
Don't know	14.9	4.1
Total additional tax liability:		
Average	\$20,117	\$11,707
	-----percent-----	
Distribution:		
\$0-\$4,999	27.4	47.6
\$5,000 - \$9,999	12.9	14.3
\$10,000 - \$14,999	16.1	2.4
\$15,000 - \$19,999	11.3	11.9
\$20,000 - \$29,999	9.6	9.5
\$30,000 - \$39,999	12.9	14.3
\$40,000 and over	9.7	0.0
Factors believed to contribute to additional tax liabilities:		
Recapture of investment credits	52.2	32.7
Recapture of depreciation	48.9	36.4
Additional capital gains taxes	52.2	69.1
Debt forgiveness	25.0	22.6
Other	6.6	6.6
Filed for bankruptcy in the year quit farming?		
No	--	87.5
Yes	--	12.5
Have since filed for bankruptcy		
No	--	93.4
Yes	--	6.6

reported additional taxes due to capital gains. About 23 percent reported additional taxes arising from debt forgiveness.

Filing bankruptcy continues to be a means used by former farmers to eliminate farm-related financial obligations. About 12 percent (15 farmers) reported filing bankruptcy in the year they quit farming. An additional six farmers have since filed bankruptcy for a total bankruptcy reporting rate of 17.5 percent.

Transition

The decision to leave farming can be a traumatic experience for farm families. Over 35 percent of the respondents to the recent farm survey indicated that the farm situation had affected their personal life "a great deal" (Figure 2) compared to nearly twice that percentage (69 percent) of previous former farmers responding to the same question. Twenty-three percent said the farm situation had "no" effect on their personal lives compared to 3 percent of the previous former farmers. This may be an indication that some of the social stigma attached to "going broke" has eased. Another explanation may be that farmers who have recently quit have watched other farmers go out of business before them and perceive them to have made the transition and led normal lives with fewer stress problems.

Among the respondents that indicated "a great deal" or "some" effect on their personal life, 73.9 percent indicated they felt an "increased level of stress" (Figure 3), and about 40 percent felt they were "getting along on less money." Other specific effects were on their "overall attitude" (8.2 percent) and "no or less vacation" (4.6 percent).

Coinciding with reduced effects of the farm situation on their personal lives (between the previous group and the recent former farmers) were reduced frequencies of stressful events. Thirty-two percent of the recent former farmers indicated that they suffered from depression or other emotional problems compared to over 48 percent of the previous group (Table 10). Fewer recent former farmers experienced unusual marital or other family stress or had been divorced than farmers in the previous study. However, similarly high percentages of former farmers in both study groups felt these events were agriculturally related.

Numerous state and local agencies, both public and private, are available to assist the public. Respondents were asked to indicate which agencies they had contacted and which specific programs they had utilized during their transition out of farming. The state job service was contacted most frequently and was considered most useful by recent former farmers, which coincides with responses from the previous former farmers (Table 11). The Credit Review Board and the North Dakota Department of Agriculture were the next two agencies most frequently contacted. These agencies had programs and staff to aid farmers in dealing with their financial situation. Nevertheless, 51.6 percent had not contacted any of the agencies listed.

Regarding the actual programs utilized, recent former farmers took advantage of programs to enhance their marketability in the job market. Nearly one-fourth used educational grants and loans to further their education (Table 12). Job retraining and job placement programs were utilized by 14.9 percent and 11.9 percent of the recent former farmer respondents, respectively. Credit counseling was another popular program and was used by over 20 percent of the respondents. Direct assistance

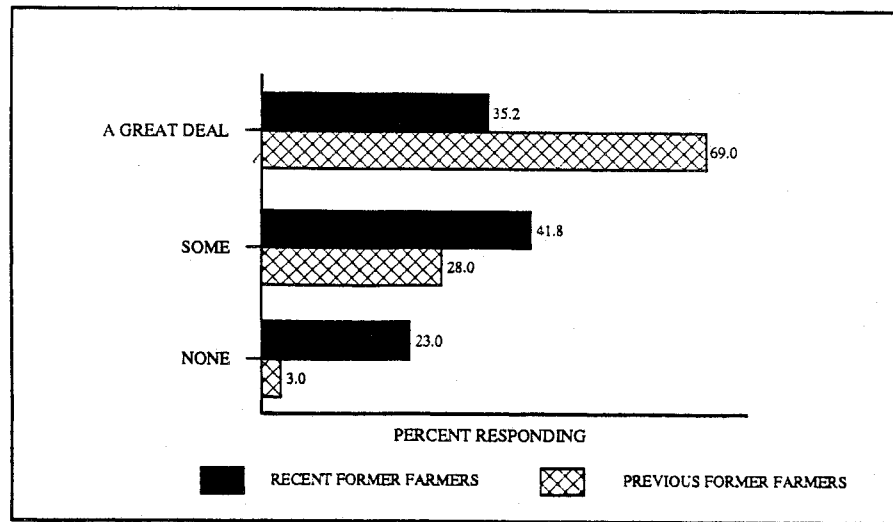


Figure 2. Effect of Farm Situation on Personal Life

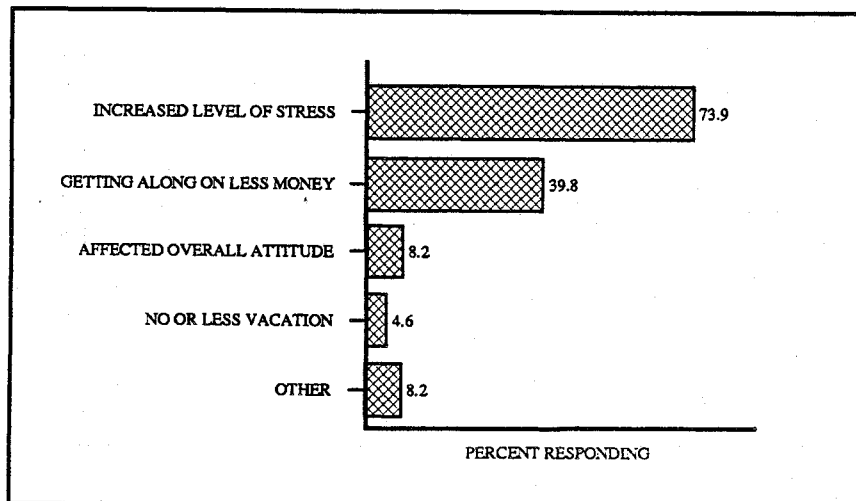


Figure 3. Specific Farm Situation Effects on Personal Life

TABLE 10. EVENTS EXPERIENCED BY RECENT AND PREVIOUS FORMER FARMERS DURING LAST TWO YEARS OF FARMING

Item	Previous Former Farmers		Recent Former Farmers	
	a	b	a	b
	-----percent-----			
Suffered depression or other emotional problems	48.5	91.5	32.0	94.6
Experienced unusual marital or other family stress or conflict	42.0	91.5	36.1	95.3
Been divorced	13.6	65.2	8.3	77.8

a = Percentage that experienced event.

b = Percentage who felt event was agriculturally related.

TABLE 11. AGENCIES CONTACTED DURING TRANSITION OUT OF FARMING

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers
	-----%-----	
State Job Service*	33.7	28.7
Credit Review Board	11.2	16.4
ND Department of Agriculture	7.7	13.1
County social services	18.3	4.9
A church	15.4	4.9
Extension Service	12.4	4.9
State or regional human services	7.1	2.5
Veterans Administration	2.4	1.6
Other organization	1.2	1.6
Private employment service	7.7	0.0
Private mental health org.	2.9	0.0
Org. sponsored by religious org.	2.4	0.0
None	30.8	51.6

*Rated as most useful by recent former farmers.

TABLE 12. PROGRAMS AND SERVICES USED DURING TRANSITION OUT OF FARMING

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers
	-----%	
Educational grants & loans*	22.8	23.8
Credit counseling*	14.9	20.5
Job retraining program*	11.1	14.9
Job placement program	11.9	11.5
Fuel assistance	23.6	9.0
Food stamps	18.5	8.2
Legal assistance	10.6	3.3
Medical assistance	2.5	3.3
Emotional, drug, and alcohol counseling	9.9	2.5
Rent assistance	3.1	2.5
Elderly assistance program	0.6	0.0
Other	0.8	1.2
None	43.2	48.4

*Rated as most useful by recent former farmers.

programs such as fuel assistance and food stamps were used by a noticeably lower percentage of recent former farmers than was indicated in the previous survey. Respondents indicated that credit counseling, educational grants and loans, and job retraining were the most useful in making their transition, but 48.4 percent had not used any of the programs listed.

Employment

The transition from farming is associated with the respondent and/or spouse finding suitable employment. Nearly 92 percent of recently surveyed former farmers were employed at the time of the survey, about 9 percent more than for previous former farmers (Table 13). A lower percentage of recent former farmers were either unemployed or students (2.5 percent for each). Over 90 percent of the respondents worked full-time. Spouses were employed in 75 percent of the households recently surveyed compared to about 57 percent in the previous survey. Sixty-one percent of the spouses were employed full-time.

Respondents were asked the duration of their search for a job. Fifty-six percent of the recent respondents reported a search of less than two months, and nearly two-thirds searched for less than 3 months (Table 13). Respondents searched an average of 2.8 months for employment. Spouses reported similar experiences and searched for an average of 2.2 months.

Recent respondents' satisfaction with their job was higher (83.3 percent) than that for respondents to the previous former survey (71.2 percent). A similar percentage of

TABLE 13. SELECTED EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF NORTH DAKOTA PREVIOUS AND RECENT FORMER FARM OPERATORS

Item	Unit	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers
Employment status of respondent:			
Employed	Percent	82.7	91.7
Unemployed	Percent	8.0	2.5
Student	Percent	6.0	2.5
Retired	Percent	3.3	3.3
Employment status of spouse:			
Not employed	Percent	42.7	25.0
Employed	Percent	57.3	75.0
Respondent's work is:			
Full-time	Percent	—	90.1
Part-time	Percent	—	9.9
Spouse's work is:			
Full-time	Percent	—	61.0
Part-time	Percent	—	39.0
Respondent months to find employment?			
Mean	Number	3.1	2.8
Median	Number	2.0	1.0
Less than 1	Percent	27.5	27.4
1 to 2	Percent	18.3	28.6
2 to 3	Percent	15.6	9.5
3 to 6	Percent	15.6	16.7
6 or more	Percent	22.9	17.9
Spouse months to find employment			
Mean	Number	NA	2.2
Median	Number	NA	1.0
Less than 1	Percent	NA	31.4
1 to 2	Percent	NA	25.0
2 to 3	Percent	NA	17.2
3 to 6	Percent	NA	14.1
6 more more	Percent	NA	12.6
Respondent's satisfaction with present employment:			
Satisfied	Percent	71.2	83.3
Neutral	Percent	16.5	9.8
Dissatisfied	Percent	12.3	6.9
Spouse's satisfaction with present employment:			
Satisfied	Percent	NA	84.0
Neutral	Percent	NA	7.4
Dissatisfied	Percent	NA	8.6
Respondent will look for another job within the year			
	Percent	39.0	23.8
Spouse will look for another job within the year			
	Percent	30.5	20.4
Had to move to another city/state to find employment			
	Percent	41.2	35.0
Preferred to stay in hometown			
	Percent	58.1	39.5

spouses were satisfied or completely satisfied with their present employment. However, about 24 percent of the respondents and over 20 percent of their spouses will seek alternative employment in 1989.

Relocation is sometimes an unwelcome requirement for finding suitable employment during the transition from farming. Thirty-five percent of the recent former farmers surveyed had to move to another city to find employment, and nearly 40 percent of these would have preferred to stay in their hometown.

The current occupations of recent former farmers and spouses are shown in Table 14. Over 20 percent of the respondents and 42 percent of spouses are employed in technical, sales, or administrative jobs. Twenty percent of the respondents are employed as equipment operators or laborers, and about one-third of the spouses are employed in service jobs.

The average hourly wage reported by recent former farmer respondents was \$7.46 (Table 15). Spouses earned 60 cents less per hour than the respondents on average. Nearly 38 percent of the respondents and 48.6 percent of the spouses earned less than \$6.00 per hour.

TABLE 14. CURRENT OCCUPATION OF RECENT FORMER FARMERS AND SPOUSES

Occupation	Respondent	Spouse
	-----%	
Technical, sales, or administrative	22.5	42.0
Equipment operators/laborers	20.0	0.0
Student	12.5	1.2
Service jobs	10.8	32.1
Precision production/craft/repair	11.7	3.7
Professional/management	8.3	21.0
Farming	8.3	0.0

TABLE 15. HOURLY WAGE RATES OF RECENT FORMER FARMERS AND THEIR SPOUSES

Item	Respondent	Spouse
	-----\$/hr-----	
Range	3.35 - 18.70	1.00 - 23.40
Mean	7.46	6.86
Median	6.63	5.96
	-----%	
Distribution:		
Less than \$4.00/hr	6.1	11.8
\$4.00 to \$5.99/hr	31.8	36.8
\$6.00 to \$7.99/hr	25.8	17.6
\$8.00 to \$9.99/hr	16.7	11.8
\$10.00 to \$11.99/hr	7.6	11.8
\$12.00/hr and over	12.1	8.8

TABLE 16. OFF-FARM WORK EXPERIENCE OF RECENT FORMER FARMERS AND SPOUSES

Item	Unit	Respondent	Spouse
Worked off-farm before quitting			
Yes	Percent	43.3	47.6
Years worked at job:			
Mean	Number	6.6	6.4
Median	Number	4.0	5.5
Distribution:			
Less than 1	Percent	13.7	2.4
1 to 3	Percent	29.4	38.1
4 to 6	Percent	17.6	23.8
7 to 9	Percent	13.7	9.5
10 and over	Percent	27.4	26.2
Did work experience help find employment after ceasing to farm?			
Yes	Percent	57.4	80.0

Nearly one-half (47.6 percent) of the spouses and 43.3 percent of the respondents had an off-farm job before ceasing to farm (Table 16). Respondents and spouses each had worked off the farm an average of about 6.5 years and over one-fourth had worked for 10 years or more. Nearly 80 percent of the spouses and 57.4 percent of respondents reported that their off-farm work experience helped them to find employment after ceasing to farm.

Current Financial Status

Recent former farmers have apparently fared somewhat better, at least initially, than previous former farmers. Recent respondents reported a mean family income of about \$36,000, nearly \$7,000 higher than previous former farmers (Table 17). This could be due to higher education levels attained by recent former farmers; over 20 percent of the respondents and spouses had completed college. Recent respondents also reported fewer total assets and total debts than those previously surveyed, but recent former farmers' net worth was substantially greater (\$28,729) than the negative amount (-\$3,148) reported by the previous group. This may indicate that recent former farmers made the decision to quit before their asset and debt values reached unmanageable levels.

Over two-thirds of the recently surveyed former farmers indicated they were better off financially today than when they were farming (Figure 4). The most frequently cited reasons for being financially better off were "less stress" (58.9 percent) and "more stability" (55.6 percent).

Summary

The unfavorable farm economy and the 1988 drought continue to pressure some farm families to quit farming and seek alternative employment. Many of those who have quit (albeit involuntarily) were caught up in the continuing squeeze of rising

TABLE 17. FAMILY INCOME AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES OF PREVIOUS FORMER, RECENT FORMER, AND CURRENT FARM OPERATORS

Item	Previous Former Farmers	Recent Former Farmers	Current Farmers
-----dollars-----			
Total family income:			
Mean	29,411	36,062	29,024
Median	18,000	28,000	--
Total assets:			
Mean	164,221	100,269	391,025
Median	65,000	50,000	283,000
Total debts:			
Mean	165,825	70,490	127,284
Median	60,000	21,000	80,000
Net worth:			
Mean	-3,148	28,729	123,182
Median	11,000	20,000	177,000

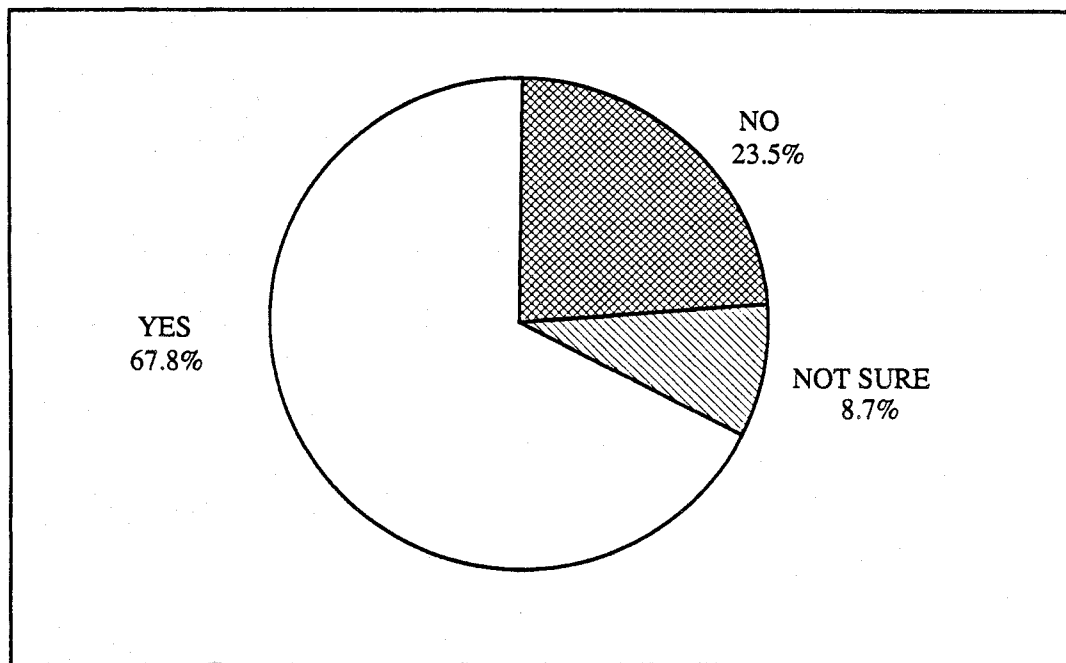


Figure 4. Former Farmers Better-off Financially Today

input costs (not the least of which was interest rates), land values, and access to readily available credit. This occurred during a period (late 1970s and early 1980s) when the prevailing mentality among many involved in all facets of agriculture was that price inflation (of land, commodity prices, etc.) would be sustained in the long-term. Such was not the case. A portion of the state's farmers were in financial positions that were ill-suited to weather the adverse conditions that ensued. This study summarized the characteristics of these farmers who made the transition from farming since 1985. The most salient of the results are summarized as follows:

- Recent former farmers were seven years younger, on average, than farmers currently in operation. Recent former farmers apparently have a higher education level compared to respondents of the previous study. Over 20 percent of both the farmers and their spouses had completed a college education compared to 14.4 percent and 8.6 percent of previous former farmer respondents and spouses, respectively.
- A majority had started farming after 1970 and operated predominately crop-oriented farms. Comparison of gross cash farm income to that of current farmers indicates that former farmers' operations were similar, on average, to current farm operators. Recent former farmers reported considerably higher net cash farm income than previous former farmers, but still 58 percent less than that of current farm operators. This indicates a continued inability to meet financial obligations even at a higher level of profit. Their average debt-to-asset ratio was 114.9 percent.
- Not surprisingly, 83 percent cited financial problems as the reason they quit farming. However, 41 percent said they could have made changes in their operation that would have enabled them to continue farming. The most frequently cited change was reducing capital expenditures.
- Over one-half of the recent former farmers indicated they would never return to farming. The remainder indicated they would return in response to less government involvement, higher commodity prices, or lower interest rates.
- Overall, operating loans had decreased on average from the previous survey. The percentage left unpaid to commercial banks and PCAs decreased, but FmHA's share of unpaid dollars increased from 52 percent to 83 percent of the total unpaid debt. This may indicate a more cautious approach by commercial and quasi-governmental lenders in light of past farm failures. However, it may also indicate a lessened need for operating capital due to advance government program payments, which were in place during that time period.
- Over 60 percent of the respondents reported an average of \$54,378 in intermediate-term loans. The average amount left unpaid increased from over \$37,000 for previous former farmers to about \$52,000 for recent former farmers. Commercial banks and FmHA had similar shares of total loan dollars with PCAs holding only 7.5 percent. About one-half of loans made by banks and FmHA were left unpaid.
- FmHA carried about one-half of the long-term debt reported by recent former farmers. About two-thirds of this debt was left unpaid to FmHA.

- Contingent tax liability was a concern for 46 percent of the respondents. The average tax liability incurred was \$11,707, down from over \$20,000 for previous former farmers.
- Fewer respondents indicated the farm situation had "a great deal" of effect on their personal lives compared to the previous former farmer study. This may indicate that some of the social stigma associated with "going broke" has eased. The decision to quit and the means to do so may have also become easier as lessons were learned from neighbors who quit before them. Fewer stress-related events also were reported by recent former farmers.
- About 25 percent used educational loans and grants to enhance their marketability for employment. Other programs frequently cited were job retraining and placement services.
- Nearly 92 percent of the respondents and 75 percent of their spouses were employed at the time of the survey. Only 2.5 percent of the respondents indicated they were unemployed. This is less than the 1988 state average unemployment rate of 4.9 percent² and indicates that most former farmers have marketable job skills. About 56 percent reported a job search of less than two months, and over 83 percent were satisfied with their present job.
- Transition from farming sometimes involved relocation from their hometown to find employment. Thirty-five percent of recent former farmers relocated compared to over 41 percent of respondents to the previous former farmer survey. Nearly 40 percent of those relocating would have preferred to stay in their hometown.
- Over two-thirds of the recent former farmers indicated they were financially better-off at the time of the survey. "Less stress" and "more stability" were reasons cited for better financial well-being. Respondents reported a mean family income of \$36,000, about \$7,000 higher than that reported by previous former farmers.

²Source: Job Service of North Dakota, February 1989.

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