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An evaluation of the federal Transition Incentives Program on land access for next-generation farmers

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Abstract

Next-generation farmers face immense challenges in securing land. In recent years, some state- and federal-level land access policy incentives (LAPIs) have been implemented to address these challenges. In this paper, we assess the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), an initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program that is funded by Congressional farm bills. TIP offers landowners two years of financial incentives for leasing or selling to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher (categories of

farmers defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture). In our study, we characterize TIP participants to understand where and how TIP assists beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Our findings demonstrate that TIP serves some landowners and next-generation farmers, primarily in the Midwest and Mountain West. We demonstrate a spatial mismatch between where next-generation farmers live and high rates of TIP participation. Variable participation may be due to inconsistent outreach and limits to the program design. We identify key barriers and provide insights to improve TIP and other land access programs for next-generation farmers.

Keywords

farm bill, farming, land access, food systems, federal policy, beginning farmers, farmers of color, socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, transition

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Introduction and Literature Review

Next-generation farmers face many barriers to succeeding in farming, a concern well documented by many farmer advocates like American Farmland Trust (Freedgood & Dempsey, 2014) and the National Young Farmers Coalition (2017), government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) (Callahan & Hellerstein; 2022), and scholars and researchers (Beckett & Galt, 2014; Horst & Gwin, 2018; Ruhf, 2013). Collectively, they identify the lack of access to affordable land as a barrier for next-generation farmers (Calo & Master, 2016; Horst & Gwin, 2018).

Among next-generation farmers, Native American, Black, Latino, Asian, and other immigrant farmers and farmers of color often experience a combination of barriers, which makes their land access even more fraught. For example, Native American farmers have experienced systemic racism such as the Indian Removal Act (1830), Homestead Act (1862), and Dawes Act (1887), which collectively removed Native Americans from their lands and forced them into individualized property holdings (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). White homesteaders were the recipients of much of the land. Likewise, African American farmers have experienced systemic racism stemming from past histories of slavery and sharecropping that left most Black farmers without land ownership or financial assets (Reynolds, 2002). Stemming from policies like this, farmers of color typically have less generational wealth and family land access than white farmers, who own 98% and operate 94% of all farmland (Horst & Marion, 2019).

Federal and state governments recognize that next-generation farmers need land access. They have created a variety of incentive programs like state-level beginner tax credits, easements, and financial assistance programs and the federal Transition Incentives Program (TIP; Valliant & Freedgood, 2020). We collectively call these programs land access policy incentives, or LAPIs. Despite the rising interest in replicating and scaling up these programs, there has been little critical evaluation of them. Most of the existing research is based on small samples and case studies of specific programs. There is a significant gap in knowledge

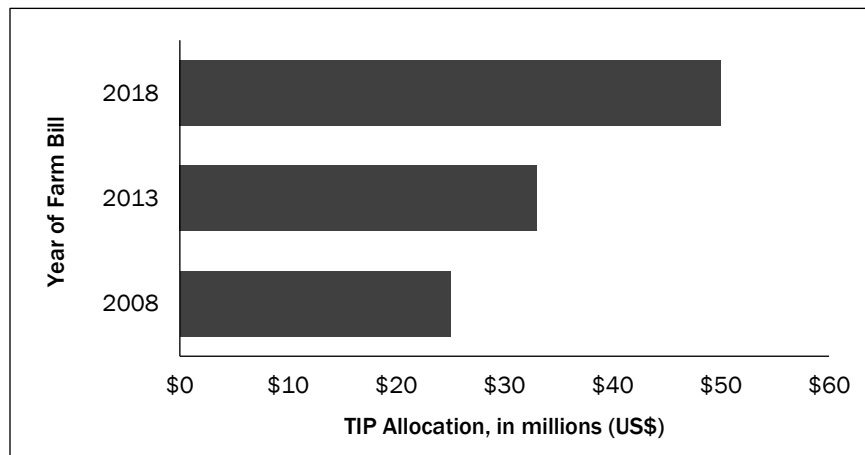
of the policies' characteristics, impacts, and extent (Schilling et al., 2015; Valliant & Freedgood, 2020). Only one study by the Center for Rural Affairs has attempted a review of the TIP, but this study examined four states and is now outdated (Johnson & Ready, 2017).

Congress passed TIP as a part of the 2008 farm bill. At that same time, Congress decreased the amount of funding and land for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As a result, millions of acres of land retiring from CRP were not eligible for re-enrollment (Myers, 2021). The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC, 2019) helped to develop the policy proposal for TIP during this time period. A core premise of TIP, as a program under the broader umbrella of CRP, is that it provides an alternative to landowners to continue to receive federal payments after their land has expired out of CRP. Early legislative support came from midwestern legislators like Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Representative Tim Walz (D-MN), and Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) (NSAC staff, personal communication, September 2021). The states represented by these legislators share proportionally high white and aging populations, large farm sizes, a large percentage of farmland and farm practices dedicated to commodity agriculture, and land in CRP (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Services [USDA NASS], 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

TIP provides landowners with an additional two years of CRP payments if they lease for five years or sell their land to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher. The USDA defines beginning farmers and ranchers as those who have less than 10 years of farming experience, regardless of age, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers as producers that are Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic or Latino, and/or Asian or Pacific Islander (USDA Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2023).

Funding for TIP is a small percentage of the farm bill. Conservation program funding has received about 7–8% of farm bill funds in recent years. Of that, CRP has received nearly \$2 billion annually, and TIP is a fraction of that (NSAC, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, the amount of

Figure 1. Funding for the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), 2008–2018



funding for TIP has gradually increased with each farm bill, to \$50 million in the 2018 farm bill, which includes \$5 million earmarked for data analysis and outreach. TIP funding is considered discretionary and has to be renewed every farm bill.

It is helpful to understand CRP to understand TIP. CRP is authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, although the roots of CRP extend back to the 1950s. The 1985 act directed the USDA to enroll 40 to 45 million acres by 1990 with two primary goals: reducing soil erosion on highly erodible cropland and curbing the production of surplus commodities (Barbarika & USDA Farm Service Agency [FSA], 2021). CRP is administered by the Farm Service Agency. As noted on the USDA FSA (n.d.-a) CRP website,

In exchange for a yearly rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP are from 10 to 15 years in length. The long-term goal of the program is to re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat. (para. 1)

There are a few different kinds of CRP enrollment: continuous, general, and grasslands. Continuous enrollment land is considered “environmentally sensitive land devoted to certain conservation

practices” (USDA FSA, 2022, p. 2). To be eligible for general sign-up, land must be highly susceptible to soil erosion or be located in a national or state CRP conservation priority area. Grassland CRP helps landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as grazing lands.

The extent and geographic range of CRP enrollment has an impact on TIP participation, because only land retiring from CRP is eligible for TIP. CRP enrollment has varied over the years (Table 1), with interest sometimes over the federal cap on acres permitted to enroll, and sometimes under it. CRP enrollment varies across the country, with the highest enrollment in 2020 in the Texas Panhandle, portions of western Kansas, eastern Colorado, Iowa, North and South Dakota, and eastern Washington. In 2020, the annual payment for CRP land was on average US\$82 per acre, although the payment varied widely by geography, general farm economic conditions, soil type, and environmental practices (USDA FSA, 2020). TIP payments are equivalent to CRP payments. The amount of payment, relative to what they might make from farming the land for example, is a factor in whether landowners participate in either program.

In the TIP program, the discrepancy in terms of payment term (two years) and required lease term (five years) is built into the program. The landowner can choose to charge prevailing rental rates to next-generation farmers, though it is possible that some choose to pass on savings from their TIP payments. The contract for TIP is simple and requires very little information about the landowner or next-generation farmer (see Appendix, Figure A1). The next-generation farmer’s signature certifies that they are a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher as defined by the USDA, but they are not required to identify which one they are or provide any information beyond

Table 1. Transition Incentives Program (TIP) Participation

Year	Total TIP contracts	Sum of acres enrolled in TIP	Sum of total TIP payments (US\$)	Average acres per contract	Average payment per contract (US\$)
2014	534	85,446	\$8,548,804	160	\$16,009
2015	253	39,765	\$4,039,906	157	\$15,968
2016	186	33,489	\$3,737,993	180	\$20,097
2017	284	46,380	\$3,806,516	163	\$13,403
2018	250	19,658	\$2,616,740	79	\$10,467
2019	3	95	\$12,168	32	\$4,056
2020	732	126,237	\$11,560,462	172	\$15,793
2021	392	71,886	\$7,221,972	183	\$18,423
2022	43	9,818	\$726,280	228	\$16,890
2023	4	150	\$15,752	37	\$3,938
Sum or average	2,681	432,923	\$42,286,593	161	\$15,772.69

that. They also agree to develop and implement a conservation plan. Scarce information limits subsequent analysis.

TIP is promoted and administered in each state primarily by staff at the FSA as part of their work portfolio. From stakeholder interviews, county FSA officers typically communicate with interested landowners and next-generation farmers. Meanwhile, staff at the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) often offer technical support to interested TIP landowners. Staff at extension services and nonprofit organizations sometimes do outreach regarding TIP, although this varies state by state based on local capacity and interest.

TIP targets new and beginning farmers and farmers of color, who have some things in common as well as important differences. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, both categories of farmers run smaller farms, in terms of both acres and sales. They are more likely to sell directly to consumers. There are also noteworthy differences. For example, Black farmers tend to be older. There are also differences in where these farmers live (discussed later in this article). While targeted in other USDA programs, TIP is not directed toward women farmers or Limited Resource Farmers or Ranchers (USDA NRCS, n.d.; USDA FSA, n.d.-b).

There is not much research or documentation about TIP. In fact, advocacy coalitions like NSAC have publicly called for greater analysis of TIP,

including an examination of the average size of participating parcels and conservation practices utilized while the land is in CRP (Obudsink, personal communication, 2020). Our study responds to some of these information gaps and explores how TIP serves the land access needs of next-generation farmers.

Applied Research Methods

We used USDA data to examine participation, and we interviewed those familiar with TIP to hear about their experience with the program. The data on TIP participation was obtained in 2022 using a Freedom of Information Act request. We examined participation over time, the types of landowners and farmers who participated, their geographic distribution, and the types of farmland enrolled. Unfortunately, there are significant limitations to the data on TIP. The USDA does not collect detailed information about land owners or eligible farmers or about the farming or environmental practices adopted under the program.

To complement our data analysis, we also conducted interviews with key informants, including staff at advocacy organizations such as Center for Rural Affairs, National Farmers Union, and NSAC; federal employees and state leads (with FSA and NRCS); and other people familiar with the program. In total, we conducted 13 interviews over phone or video. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour. We asked questions about the inter-

viewees’ knowledge of TIP, local program participation, known impacts, barriers specific to participation by beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and their overall reflections on the program. We asked for their reactions and additional perspectives to our maps and tables. Our interview approach *was* reviewed by the Portland State University Human Research Protection Program and determined exempt, with reference number HRRP 217502-18.

We transcribed all the interviews by hand and then coded them in the program atlas.ti, software designed to facilitate qualitative data analysis. We looked through the transcripts for perspectives on key themes including overall TIP participation, statewide and countywide variation, participation by next-generation farmers, and barriers to participation. These themes are now the subheadings in the below section. Within each theme, we discuss where there was significant overlap in perspectives, and we also highlight key differences. Per our IRB-exempted protocol, we kept the interviews confidential, since some USDA staff expressed hesitation about participating and particularly about sharing critical insight if they were personally identified. As such, identifying traits of interviewees have been excluded. In addition to these methods, our research was guided by a national advisory team consisting of researchers and practitioners from across the country who are knowledgeable about land access barriers and policy initiatives.

Results

Overall TIP Participation by the Numbers

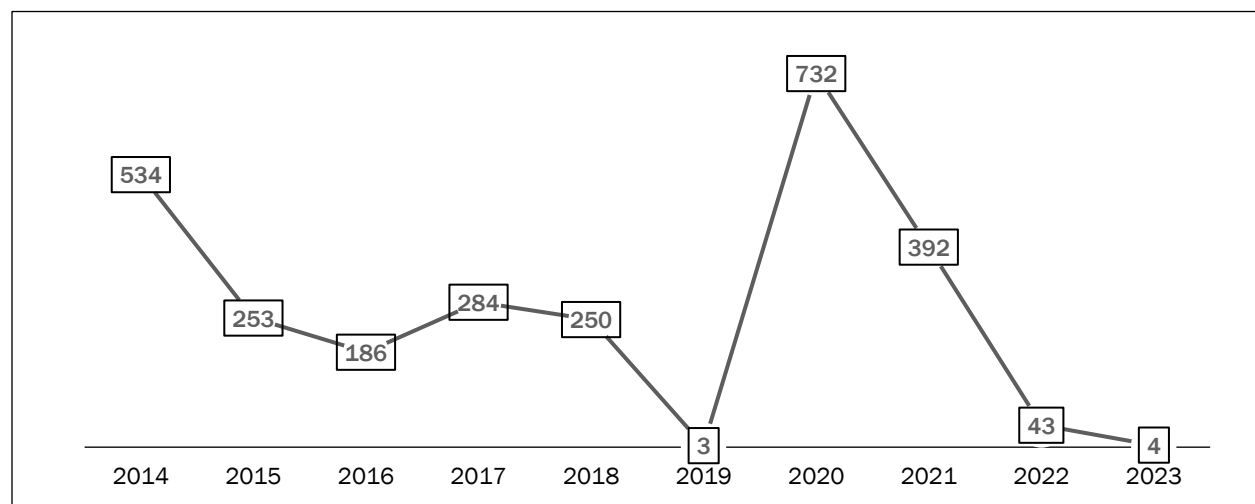
From January 2014 to April 2023, there were 2,682 TIP contracts, or about 300 on average annually, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 2. Annual participation has been highly variable, with the most contracts initiated in 2020 by far (732) and the fewest in 2019 (3) and 2022 (43).

From 2014 to 2022, about US\$42.3 million was spent on TIP payments to landowners, or about US\$2.2 million annually, with the most money being spent in 2014 and 2020 (over US\$8 million and US\$11 million, respectively), and very little in 2019 and 2022. USDA staff suggested that the reasons that 2019 was a low enrollment year “could have something to do with the transition from the manual process to CCMS [a new electronic database], as this was occurring at the time. Also, there was a limited signup period for 2019 TIP.” (Sign-ups in 2019 lasted from June 3, 2019, through August 23, 2019.) The year 2019 was subsequently followed by a high-enrollment year. Explanations like these may also account for other variation.

Statewide and Countywide Variation

TIP participation varies across the country, with most of the projects, acres enrolled, and payments directed to counties in the Mountain West, Midwest, and Plains states, as shown in the maps in Figure 3. The five states with the highest numbers

Figure 2. Number of Transition Incentives Program (TIP) Contracts Over Time (2014–2023)



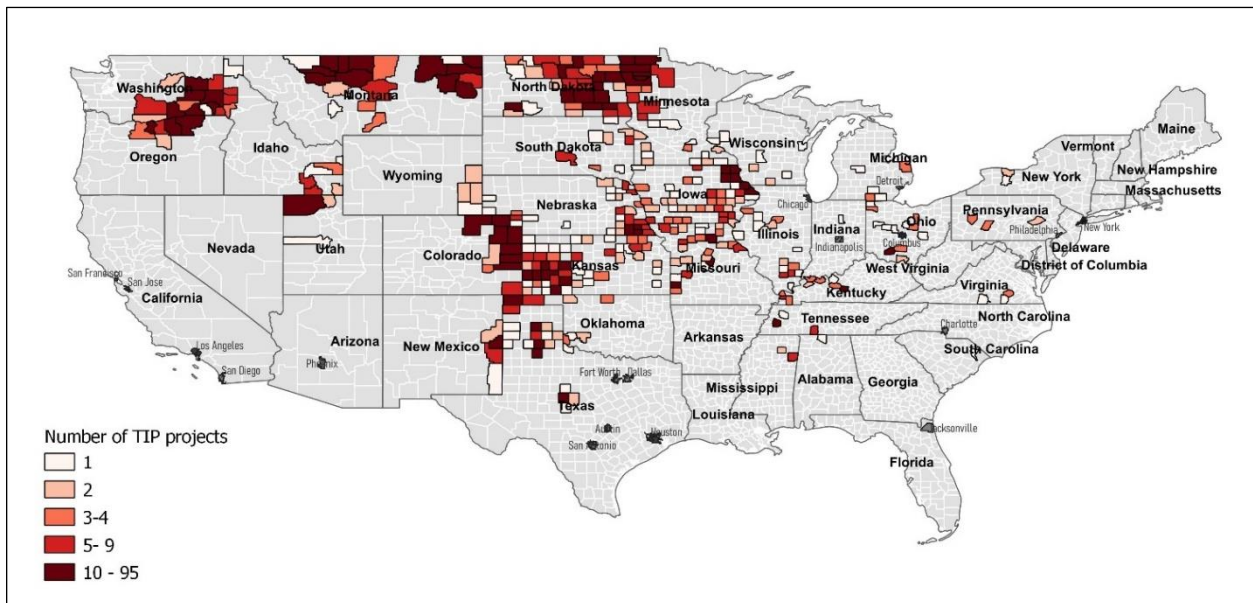
of TIP projects are Montana (408), Minnesota (295), North Dakota (259), Kansas (248), and Iowa (224). The counties that each had over 50 TIP projects were Chouteau County, Montana (96); Roseau County, Minnesota (83); Hill County, Montana (82); Marshall County, Minnesota (58); Kittson County, Minnesota (56), Cimarron County, Okla-

homa (56), and Curry County, New Mexico (52).

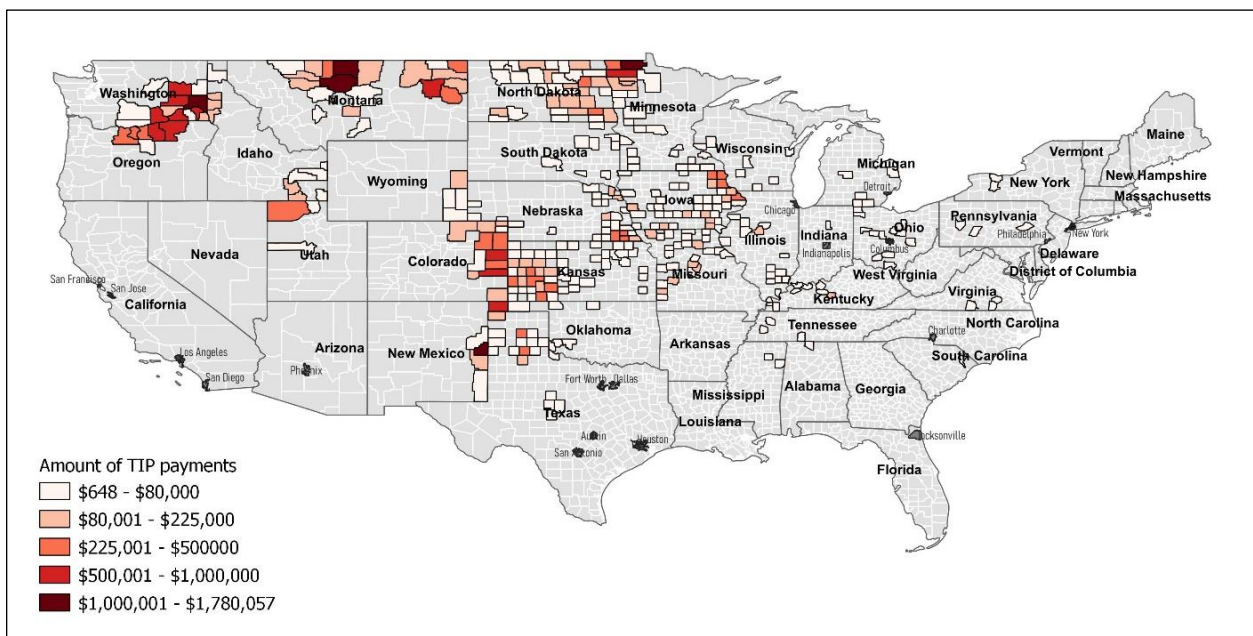
Generally, interviewees observed that TIP participation is higher where there have been higher amounts of CRP land (and thus land retiring from CRP). Interviewees commented on the variability of farmland expiring from CRP and thus becoming eligible for TIP. They noted that some CRP lands

Figure 3. Transition Incentives Program (TIP) Participation by County

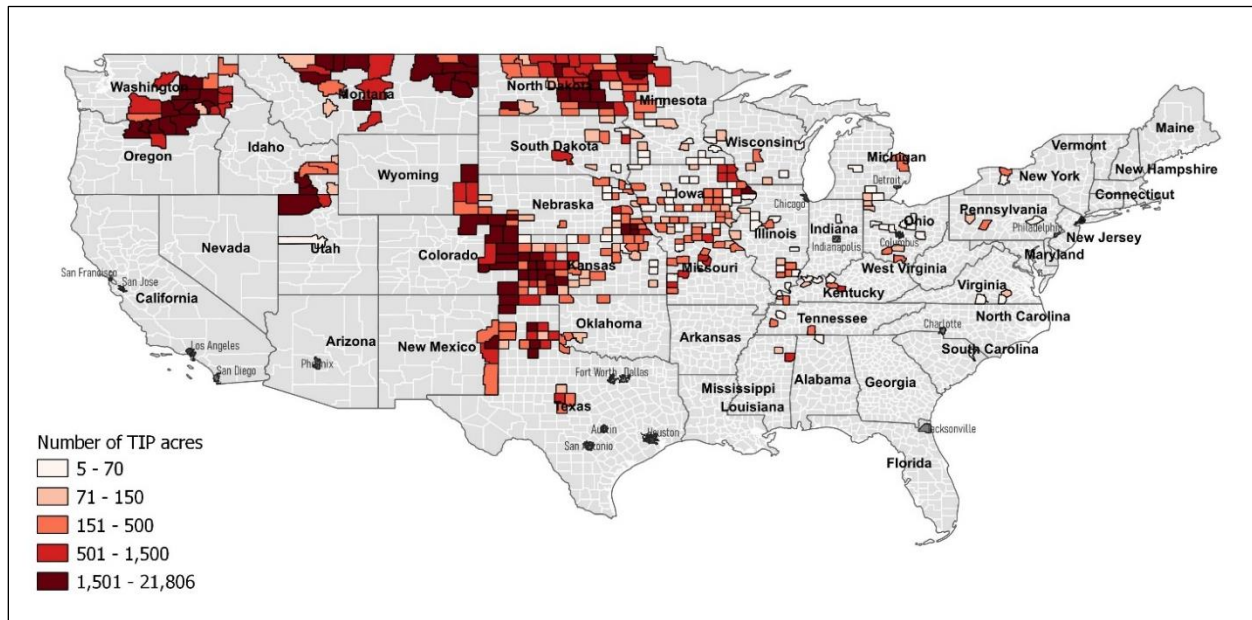
(a) Number of TIP Projects in 2014-2023



(b) Amount of TIP Payments, 2014-2023 (US\$)



(c) Number of TIP acres, 2104–2023



may be more suitable for agricultural production than other land and may contribute to the variation in participation in TIP. For example, USDA staff in the Midwest explained that:

CRP land varies by location, history, et cetera. In [this state], we have land that is “not as productive” and hence in CRP, but compared to Colorado, it is probably pretty productive. ... Our most marginal lands are still pretty productive—these are mainly in the southern and northeastern areas of the state.

Within states, many noted that the higher-participation areas of TIP are areas where there is a high concentration of CRP land and also interest from beginning farmers from generational farming families. For example, a NRCS employee in the Northwest explained that:

Most of our CRP land, and all of TIP participation, is in the southeast [part of the] state. [Those counties] are all mostly generational farming, four to five generation communities. So, you have a lot of beginning farmers wanting to stay in the community, take over dad’s ground, the neighbor’s farm, et cetera. Once you have a few contracts, that sets an example,

gets more interest. I have not seen as much in other counties.

In addition, interviewees noted that certain types of TIP-eligible farmland, for example large tracts of grassland, are currently attractive to some beginning farmers. A USDA employee in the Midwest commented:

TIP is very popular in the northwest corner of the state. [This state] is one of the larger CRP states, which means there is more land that would be potentially eligible for TIP. [This state] also has a fair amount of beginning farmers. In the northwest part of the state, there also tends to be large tracts of land that are enrolled in grass practices. For a beginning farmer, having access to a larger tract in one spot would be more desirable than smaller fields that are spread out. ... A beginning rancher, for example, might want to expand their herd, and it would probably be pretty easy to transition for that.

In the central part of the country, USDA staff noted that TIP participation is highest along the border near Nebraska and Kansas, where there is more CRP land, mainly in grassland. It may be

somewhat easier for next-generation farmers to convert that land to livestock and grazing, though, in the words of interviewees, it is still “not an easy road.” Interviewees also noted that parts of Kansas and Nebraska have relatively lower prices for farmland compared to near the Denver metro area, though there can be problems with insufficient rainfall.

One USDA employee in the Northwest observed that recent caps on CRP enrollment or delayed CRP enrollment periods have led some landowners to participate in TIP to at least receive rental payments plus the additional two years of TIP payments:

In the last four years, we have seen a big decrease in CRP payments in some areas, a 50% decrease—that is a big deal for 10-year enrollment, ... so some landowners look at TIP, see two years of payments (at higher values) and only five-year commitment—and they try TIP out, as it seems to financially make sense.

Another interviewee commented that rising commodity prices and rising costs of maintenance from CRP lands can influence landowners to look to TIP:

Commodity prices play a big role—if there is more drought, like this past summer, it might push some landowners into CRP payments, others might think about how can I raise my cattle, maybe I can have some expanded grazing land managed by TIP. ... Depending on commodity prices, a lot of land goes into TIP that the landowner was planning to rip out of CRP anyway, due to rising commodity prices, or maybe to manage grasses that are coming up.

Interviewees suspect that variation in TIP participation may be due to some states and county offices doing more outreach. For example, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture does outreach to next-generation farmers proactively. The state also has a relatively robust and reasonably well-resourced FarmLink program that connects

retiring farmers with beginning farmers.

While formal outreach is important, informal outreach via word-of-mouth is also influential. In the Northwest, a USDA employee explained that where TIP participation is high, “word spreads quickly when a landowner is looking to enroll in TIP. If a beginning farmer is interested in more land, he usually tells them [the landowner] long before their CRP contract is expiring.”

Interviewees also offered some reflections on reasons for low participation. Some interviewees noted that there is land that probably should be eligible for CRP designation but is not due to the history, technical parameters, and cultural bias within the program. As one USDA employee in the Northwest explained:

One reason for lower TIP participation in some areas... It's unfortunate because a lot of Indian land should be eligible for CRP. But we've had people come to the land to try to farm it, and then abandon it because not very good for farming—high erosion, etc. ... but then the land doesn't get put into CRP/isn't seen as eligible for it.

TIP Participation by Next-Generation Farmers

Unfortunately, the USDA does not systematically collect demographic information about participating landowners or farmers. Without that data, we are unable to assess participation in a quantitative manner. Instead, we highlight spatially where TIP participation is concentrated (Figure 4) and show that these areas do not overlap with areas with high numbers of next-generation farmers. The counties with higher-than-average percentage of beginning farmers are generally located in the upper Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest, with not much overlap with TIP participation, except in a few areas in Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, and Washington.

In terms of socially disadvantaged farmers, there is no overlap among TIP participation and counties with higher percentages of Native American, Black, Latino, or Asian farmers. Native American and Latino farmers tend to be located in higher percentages in the Southwest, Black farmers in the Southeast, and Asian farmers in California. In

those areas, TIP participation is low or nonexistent.

Our key informants confirm these geographic patterns. TIP appears to be serving some beginning farmers and ranchers, especially those from generational farming families. In their experience, participants came from already-established farm or ranch families, typically raising commodity crops or live-stock. Most interviewees do not experience that TIP is serving farmers from nonfarming families

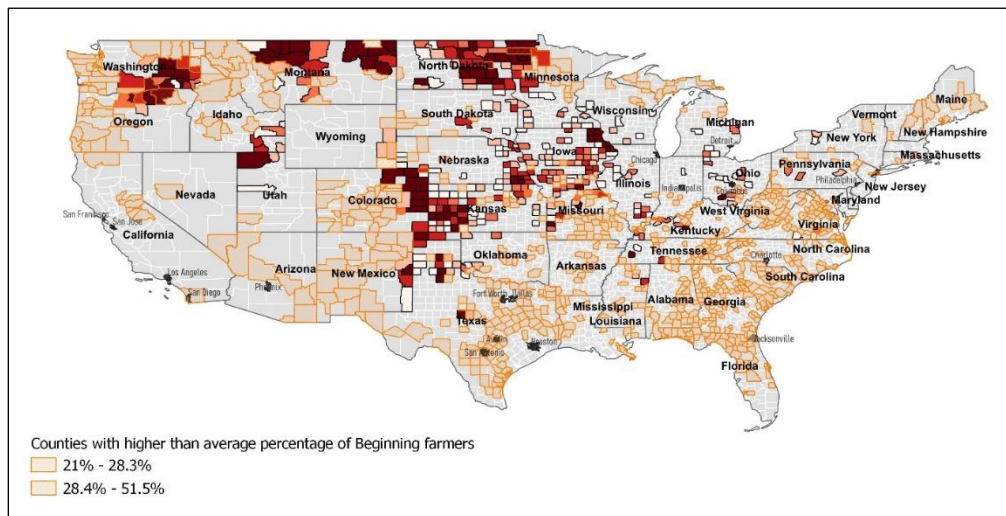
for farmers of color. Below are some example quotes from USDA employees:

Often ends up just being the neighbor kid. It often is somebody in the community, who does not have children that want to farm, that sells to a neighbor kid.

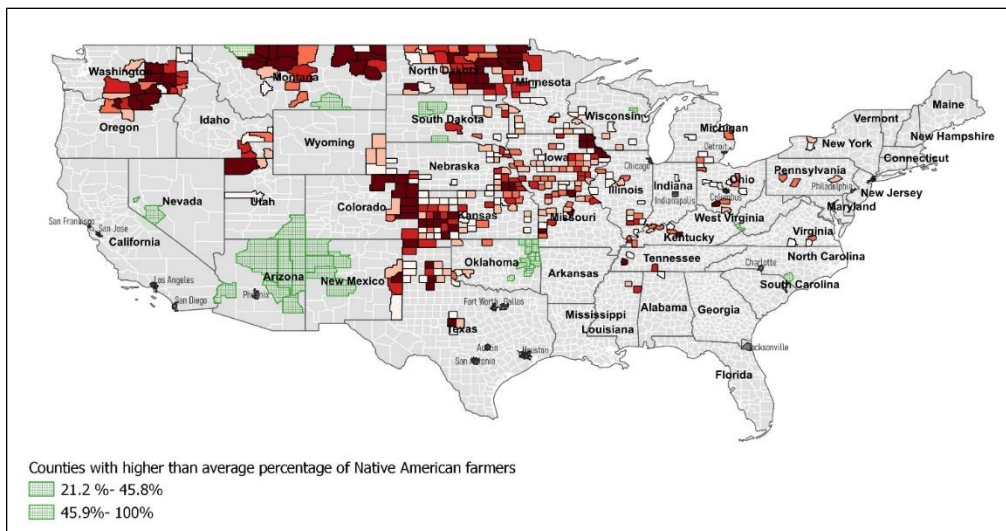
It doesn't work like someone else intended it to work, does not get new people into farming.

Figure 4. Maps of Transition Incentives Program (TIP) Participation and Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentages of Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, 2014–2023

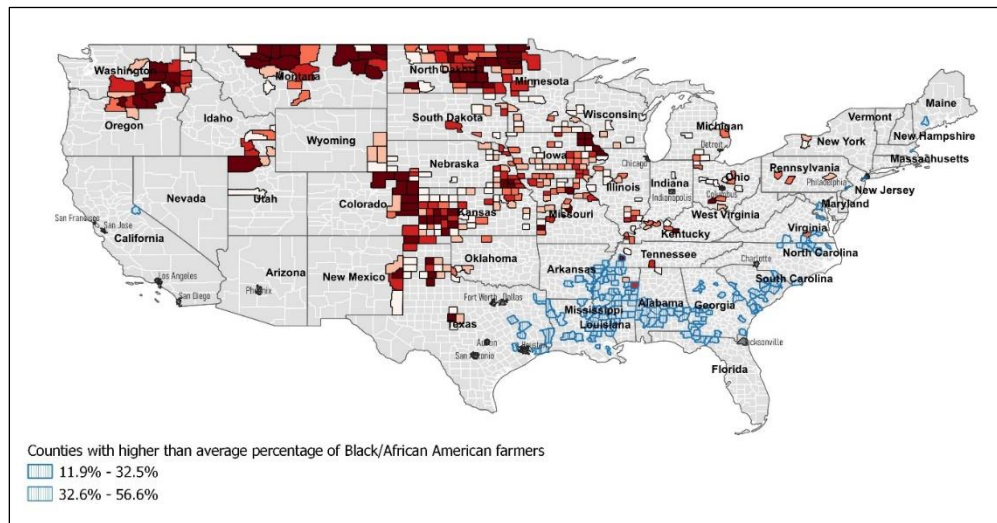
(a) Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentage of Beginning Farmers



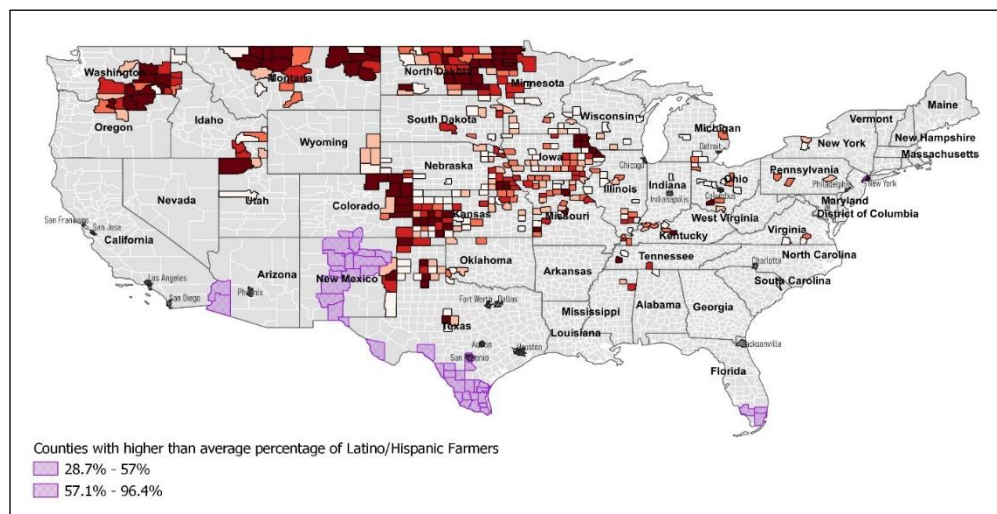
(b) Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentage of Native American Farmers



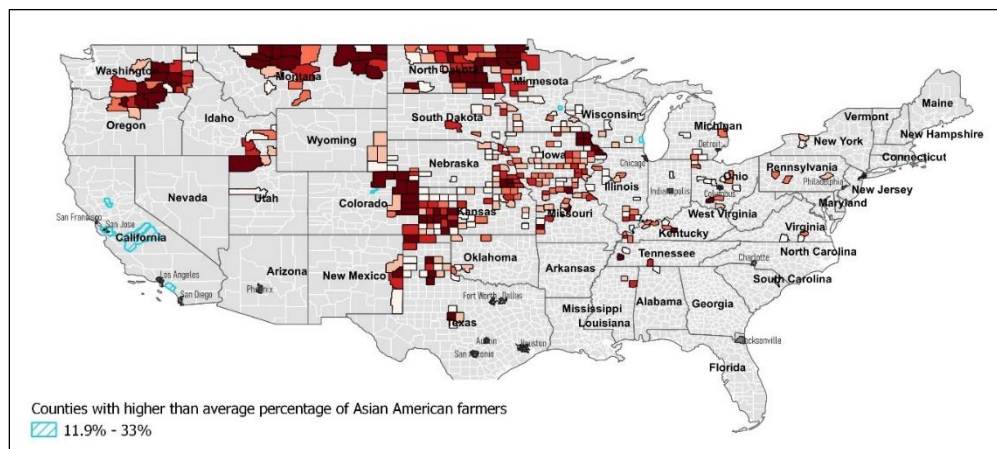
(c) Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentage of Black/African American Farmers



(d) Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentage of Latino/Hispanic Farmers



(e) Counties with Higher-than-Average Percentage of Asian American Farmers



The people who use it are already farming, though they are eligible according to the law.

Interviewees commented that the program is less accessible and attractive to socially disadvantaged farmers, in part due to the spatial mismatch of eligible land relative to where socially disadvantaged farmers live and farm. An interviewee in the southern part of the U.S. noted that “many Black farmers are in East Texas, and there is not much CRP land there. ... There are many Black farmers and other socially disadvantaged farmers around Austin, where all the land is waiting for urban development.” An interviewee in the Northwest had similar observations:

There are concentrations of minority farmers on the West Coast, e.g. on the west side of the Cascades, but there is only one general CRP enrollment on west side. Instead, the west side has Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program lands, which are intended for permanent protection.

Another interviewee commented, “In Wisconsin, there is some CRP land in the north, but that is not a desirable resource for socially disadvantaged farmers. Many of them are nearby cities like Milwaukee or Madison.”

Several staff mentioned that their offices are attempting to do more culturally specific outreach to farmers of color and farmers from different ethnic identities. For example, several FSA office interviewees mentioned they are translating outreach materials into other languages including Russian, Spanish, and Hmong. Several interviewees discussed their efforts to build relationships with various racial and ethnic farming communities. One USDA employee explained, “We have a lot of Latino farmers. We have good relationships with the Latino Farmers Association.” An NRCS employee noted that she sees effort in terms of culturally specific outreach, noting that:

[Government] departments have a division focused on race, justice, etc.; it seems to be doing good work. We are getting requests for more training on how to work with tribes,

Asian farmers, et cetera, including more for Farm Service Agency employees. This has continued through the pandemic online, though ultimately we believe field visits, in person, are the best kind of training.

Identified Barriers

Stakeholders identified some key barriers that are likely educing participation in TIP, both by landowners and farmers. These are discussed below.

Program design

Program design serves as a barrier to TIP participation. As one NRCS employee explained, “If you’re doing CRP correctly, you are putting the worst land in protection.” She relayed that many lands enrolled in CRP have high rates of soil erosion and compaction, which would make them difficult to farm. Likewise, one interviewee noted that in Texas and Oklahoma,

the lands in CRP are often the same lands that were famous for the Dust Bowl, identified as some of the worst 15% of production for agriculture in the country, and highly erodible with low annual rainfall. While land up in the Panhandle is cheap, it is also highly erodible; it may be difficult to get a conservation plan. It is difficult to get water, and more difficult all the time.

Many interviewees commented on the high costs of converting CRP land back into production. One USDA employee noted that for land “with well-established CRP cover, the equipment and cost to get a field back into production status can be costly to a new farmer.”

Because TIP is an alternative for landowners with retiring CRP land, the benefits accrue to private landowners, who are typically land-wealthy compared to many next-generation farmers (Mock, 2021). One interviewee, a USDA employee, described CRP as a “grant engine chugging along with little accountability.” Meanwhile, the program does not require landowners to sell their land permanently to next-generation farmers, and many interviewees observe that they choose to lease only. A representative of an advocacy organization rep-

resenting beginning farmers noted how this approach is problematic:

Just renting out to beginning farmers is just not wealth-building in the way that the promise of agriculture implies. You may not make a lot farming, but you build a generational asset. If we are building a vocation that folks can build a life in, just renting the land doesn't do that.

Interviewees also did not think the incentives were sufficient to lure landowners. One problem is that incentives are only two years, while the commitment to a next-generation farmer is five years. One USDA employee noted that "landowners need to sign a five-year lease in exchange for two extended CRP payments. If a beginning farmer gets out of farming before the five-year lease is up, it may complicate things for the landowner."

Uneven and limited program, staffing outreach and implementation

Interviewees commented on the high variability among federal staff at FSA, NRCS, and among the Beginning Farmer Coordinators in terms of their attention to TIP. General knowledge about TIP seems very low, and the program is not visible. For example, most state websites don't offer much information about TIP, while CRP is often highly visible. Even finding USDA and NRCS staff who felt knowledgeable enough to talk about TIP was challenging for our research team.

FSA and NRCS staff generally agreed that most of the specific TIP outreach efforts are targeted at landowners, rather than at next-generation farmers, and usually take the form of mailed letters and electronic newsletters. Interviewees commented that initial outreach to landowners with expiring CRP contracts is often too late, as landowners often make decisions well in advance of their contract deadline. Response times to interested applicants are lengthy. For example, a stakeholder commented that it took years to establish a TIP contract.

Few interviewees reach out to next-generation farmers about TIP. Instead, they rely on next-generation farmers inquiring about TIP. Interview-

ees explained that they do little outreach because they cannot easily help next-generation farmers find land. USDA employees typically mentioned relying on other organizations, such as local extension offices, to reach next-generation farmers. However, some interviewees acknowledged that Extension and other partners may not have sufficient capacity to promote TIP. One interviewee commented:

I am not sure how much Extension knows about the program, how much they promote it. Another challenge for beginning farmers is that, that state has cut Extension funding, services, ... which negatively impacts beginning farmers who can learn a lot from them.

There are instances where USDA staff promote TIP, but that is not the case everywhere. In some cases, FSA and NRCS staff were described as "dysfunctional," as in the words of one interviewee. The interviewee referenced that the staff did not fully understand how TIP works, were not timely in communicating with prospective participants, and did not process paperwork in a timely manner. According to USDA staff, some of the beginning farmer and rancher coordinators are highly engaged, and it is a good match with their experience and other job duties, while for others, it is more of a stretch and less of a personal interest. Meanwhile, in some federal jobs related to TIP and other programs targeting next-generation farmers, there is high turnover and a lack of institutional knowledge.

Some interviewees indicated that federal staff do not have the trusting relationships with landowners or next-generation farmers necessary to discuss land transfers. The federal staff commented on their constraints in making connections among landowners and prospective next-generation farmers. Many of them perceive making any sort of personal connection as unethical, because of its potential for violating implied or explicit privacy rights and the inherent perception of being biased in their offer of assistance. One interviewee noted, "Landowners and potential renters may struggle to connect. If a landowner is not interested in renting their land to a person they do not know or who has

a limited farming history, this could deter them from considering TIP.”

Barriers to participation for retiring and retired landowners

While landowners seem to be somewhat enthusiastic about transferring their land to next-generation farmers (Valliant & Freedgood, 2020), interviewees identified key barriers to TIP enrollment experienced by landowners. One is that re-enrollment in CRP is often easier and more lucrative than enrolling in TIP, in which landowners need to sign a five-year lease in exchange for two extended CRP payments. They also have to risk that their land—which has not been in production for a while—may not be economically viable for farming, or that the farming partner may fail.

Leasing or selling land to a new farmer is a fraught and delicate issue. Interviewees commented that many landowner families face conflicts about their future. Landowners do not easily develop relationships of trust with viable next-generation farmers and ranchers who are in position to fulfill the intent of the TIP program. Landowners, who are predominantly white, may also have their own implicit and explicit biases that negatively impact their ability to connect to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Landowners may have family relationships with beginning farmers and ranchers, but TIP does not allow participation by direct family members. This is seen by some landowners as a barrier, though another perspective is that the intent of the program is to expand opportunities to people who do not already have family access to farming.

Landowners may have other plans for the land that may include rewilding or selling their land. Some landowners are not motivated to find a successor. Some interviewees said they “never met a retiring farmer,” the implication being that some landowners do not actually want to or plan to stop farming and transfer to next-generation farmers.

Barriers to participation for next-generation farmers and ranchers

Many commented on the spatial mismatch, as discussed earlier and demonstrated in maps, or that TIP-eligible lands are often not located where there

are significant concentrations of next-generation farmers. One USDA employee in the Midwest wondered, “How many next generation farmers want to move to [Example] County? It is not necessarily a match with the beginning farmer needs, targeted farmer needs.” Another USDA employee commented on the burden the program puts on beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers:

They also need to be very, very flexible as to where they are willing to go to make it work for them. Sometimes you have to go where you are not always comfortable and may not have as much familiarity.

In the Midwest, an interviewee from an organization serving beginning farmers and ranchers commented that it is not just the location but also that many communities with significant CRP lands do not have the cultural and social infrastructure sought by many next-generation farmers and their families:

The need for social infrastructure—broadband, hospitals, et cetera. It is a tough decision for a farmer to leave in order to be closer to a hospital, but that stuff is important for people. There are different kinds of needs.

Many are not aware of land on the market. One USDA staff member shared:

Among beginning farmers and ranchers, we hear that it is impossible to get a bid in. If a neighbor is selling, they might get three bids from neighbors, all behind closed doors. New and beginning farmers and ranchers did not even know about the opportunity.

Another said:

It can be a challenge to get connected to existing agricultural landowners to talk about either leasing or buying land. There is no one place to find information to make a connection, and when you do, there is a trust-building process that has to occur. Even experienced farmers face these challenges.

Developing a relationship with a willing landowner can be difficult for all next-generation farmers and can be potentially harmful for socially disadvantaged farmers who face both structural and interpersonal racism. As one stakeholder in the Midwest noted, TIP does not fund mechanisms to support the careful emotional labor that would likely be needed to enhance trust among these groups and reduce stress and harm for farmers who have experienced structural and interpersonal racism. There also likely needs to be additional support for farmers of color in navigating social barriers. One interviewee reflected on the implicit expectation that farmers of color must move to parts of the state and country where CRP land exists: “And on top of that (all the other barriers of TIP), there is the topic of race. ... Will Black farmers feel okay? Maybe it is different where there are more Black farmers.”

Even if next-generation farmers make a connection, the cost for them to rent or buy TIP land is also a big barrier. Many next-generation farmers do not have sufficient capital. TIP offers no support for next-generation farmers in addressing the financial risks, including the high costs of renting land and operations. TIP may be inaccessible to all but financially well-positioned next-generation farmers and/or those that already have extensive farming backgrounds and connections.

While some landowners may pass on some of their TIP benefits to next-generation farmers in the form of reduced rents, many likely will not. As one interviewee noted, “Unless it is someone who has worked with beginning farmers, I cannot envision a reduced rental rate passed along.” Another interviewee elaborated:

The intent of TIP might be that landowners offer reduced rental rates, reduced crop share rates, to help beginning farmers and ranchers, but I don’t know that is happening. ... TIP is really geared towards making more land available, not necessarily cheaper.

As discussed earlier, the costs of transitioning CRP land back into farming is often high.

According to a USDA employee in the central U.S.,

Beginning farmers and ranchers already are usually cash strapped, ... and land coming out of CRP likely not going to have really good productivity, will need a lot of investments, ... so many of our beginning farmers and ranchers have not seen it as possible.

One interviewee especially noted the costs needed to raise livestock: “Growing up in beef—maybe someone can come on and do a big market garden, or you are going to raise livestock, in which case you need infrastructure—water/power.

External barriers

In addition to the barriers specific to TIP itself, interviewees commented on well-known external barriers, notably the poor economics of farming such as high land prices, high risk, and low profit margins. Every interviewee commented on the high cost of farmland and competition from other buyers. For example, a USDA employee described some of the competition next-generation farmers face in accessing retiring CRP land in the Texas Panhandle, including from corporations growing organically certified peanuts:

One of the buyers up there are organic growers, like peanut farmers, buying CRP land since it is easy to qualify as organic—that is a niche for expiring CRP land. ... So you have these beginning farmers and ranchers competing with organic corporations, and they cannot compete on price.

Many interviewees commented that landowners near urban areas are more likely to want to sell to developers, rather than lease or sell to next-generation farmers. A USDA employee in the Northwest reflected on similar trends of rising land prices near the large cities: “There has been a huge population spike and housing crunch in Spokane, Boise. ... Three Amazon companies have bought three farm properties. The landowners... make much more money off of that [selling the land to developers] than farming.”

In addition, interviewees commented frequently and in depth about how difficult farming is as a livelihood for next-generation farmers, with many

barriers beyond the focus of the TIP program. Many interviewees commented on the poor economics of farming. As one USDA employee in the southern U.S. noted:

Agriculture is just not a productive sector—I mean you can look at the ... numbers, it takes an extraordinary number of cattle, sheep to be successful. To ask a beginning farmer to compete seems nuts. ... You’ve got to consider the monopolies, oligopolies—let’s get down to the brass tacks. There are really only about 200,000 farmers in the US actually making a living farming. They are BIG Farms, and the inputs that go into that—fertilizer, seeds, equipment—it is NOT a buyer’s market. So, the problem is at the top and bottom.

Finally, interviewees reflected on the limitations of TIP as a program solely focused on land access. Many next-generation farmers likely have needs beyond land access, including housing. As one interviewee working with beginning farmers in the Midwest described, “you also need marketing assistance, transportation, cold storage for folks doing livestock. ... A lot of folks closer to the market are successful. Institutional markets are really important. Some folks have success with farm to school and the like.”

Discussion

TIP serves some landowners and next-generation farmers, primarily in the Midwest and Mountain West. Variable participation may be due to inconsistent outreach and to the limited program design. TIP, in its design, gives financial incentives to landowners rather than both landowners and next-generation farmers. Next-generation farmers, especially those from non-farming families, those from socially disadvantaged categories, those from low-income backgrounds, and those doing nonconventional agriculture, often need more than a short-term lease on CRP lands. This last point echoes some of the issues raised in literature that enrolled CRP lands are frequently the least productive that a landowner has and thus may not be practical or desirable for next-generation/TIP farmers. As one scholar put it, it is “unrealistic to expect that much

of this CRP land will be returned to production” (Meuleners, 2013).

Some potential reforms to TIP that may expand participation and better serve next-generation farmers include:

1. Refocus incentives to next-generation farmers. TIP incentives could be expanded to all farmland. Another strategy would be to give the incentives to next-generation farmers directly, so they could more proactively seek suitable land near their markets.
2. Allocate funds for underrepresented next-generation farmers, notably socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, to increase TIP participation. Incentivize lease-to-own or actual sales and transfer of farmland ownership, rather than leasing.
3. Expand targeted outreach and technical assistance to next-generation farmers. There are regional variations in where these next-generation farmers tend to farm, which has implications for how and where different TIP outreach should occur. For example, TIP outreach in the Southwest and Florida should be particularly inclusive and relevant for Hispanic and Latino farmers. In 2022, FSA signaled it would award 15 to 20 one-to-two-year proposals that focus on increasing awareness about CRP/TIP with a primary goal of connecting landowners and land seekers interested in program participation. The request for proposal materials promised 15 to 20 awards ranging between \$50,000 and \$300,000 for a total of \$4.5 million. As an example of technical assistance, staff should provide culturally relevant technical assistance and ongoing support to next-generation farmers to plan and implement the conservation farm plan requirements. In addition, they should connect them to other programs and assistance (such as financial classes) to best position next-generation farmers for economic and other success.
4. Support federal staff with timely program announcements, public outreach materials,

education about the systemic causes of inequities in farming/farmland access, best practice tips for outreach, and opportunities for state and local FSA staff to exchange ideas. Apply accountability measures to outreach completed by staff.

5. Engage landowners with expiring CRP contracts years before their contract expires. This could be part of a broader outreach effort to use USDA's comprehensive database on landowners and engage landowners not just in TIP but in the broader range of alternative land access strategies and tools.


In addition to the program reforms above, there is also a need for transparent reporting and evaluation. The USDA should collect more detailed data and publish data on annual TIP participation on their website, as done for CRP. Staff should publish reports on program applications and participation by next-generation farmers. Finally, evaluations of TIP should be done in collaboration with more comprehensive studies on beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to learn more about the reasons they are not participating in USDA programs.

Conclusion

TIP stands out among land access policy initiatives for its attempt to focus on beginning and socially

disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. However, it seems that TIP only serves a subset of farmers, and benefits appear to mainly accrue to landowners. TIP alone is unlikely to have a significant impact on addressing the core land transition challenges faced by retiring farmers or the access challenges faced by next-generation farmers. Some of the above reform ideas may enhance participation and better serve next-generation farmers, though a more holistic approach is needed.

This research was based on limited data on program participation and a set of interviews from key informants. More can be learned about TIP participation if the USDA makes available better data on demographics and farming practices. Future research could implement expanded research methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups of landowners and farmers who have participated in TIP or case studies of high- and low-participation areas.

TIP alone is insufficient in helping next-generation farmers succeed in the context of many of the persistent problems in farming, including the legacies of racialized capitalism and private land ownership, the rising cost of land and the poor economics of farming. If these are not resolved, next-generation farmers will continue to struggle, even if they access land. One interviewee summarized succinctly, "The system has to change." 

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Appendix A

Figure A1. Transition Incentives Program (TIP) Contract

CLOSE			
This form is available electronically.			
CRP-1R (05-14-10) U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE Commodity Credit Corporation CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM TRANSITION INCENTIVES PROGRAM CONTRACT		1. ST. & CO CODE & ADMIN. LOCATION 2. TIP CONTRACT NUMBER	
		3. ACRES FOR ENROLLMENT	4. FARM NUMBER
		5. TRACT NUMBER(S)	
6. COUNTY OFFICE ADDRESS (Include Zip Code)		7. RENTAL RATE	
		8. CONTRACT PERIOD A. BEGINNING (MM-DD-YYYY)	
		B. ENDING (MM-DD-YYYY)	
TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code):			
NOTE: The following statement is made in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1974 (5 USC 552a, as amended). The authority for requesting the information identified on this form is 7 CFR Part 1410, the Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act (15 U.S.C. 714 et seq.), and the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Pub. L. 110-246). The information will be used by CCC to consider and, if so decided, process the offer to enter into a Conservation Reserve Program contract, to assist in determining eligibility, and to determine the correct parties to the Conservation Reserve Program contract. The information collected on this form may be disclosed to other Federal, State, and Local government agencies, Tribal agencies, and nongovernmental entities that have been authorized access to the information by statute or regulation and/or as described in applicable Routine Uses identified in the System of Records Notice for USDA/FSA-2, Farm Records File (Automated). Information provided hereunder will be subject to the provisions of section 1619 of Pub. L. 110-246, section 2004 of Pub. L. 107-171, the Privacy Act, and other applicable privacy laws. Providing the requested information is voluntary. However, failure to furnish the requested information will result in a determination of ineligibility to offer to enter into a Conservation Reserve Program contract. This information collection is exempted from the Paperwork Reduction Act, as it is required for administration of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (see Pub. L. 110-246, Title II, Subtitle J – Miscellaneous Conservation Provisions). The provisions of appropriate criminal and civil fraud, privacy, and other statutes may be applicable to the information provided. RETURN THIS COMPLETED FORM TO YOUR COUNTY FSA OFFICE.			
9. CERTIFICATION: By signing below, the retired or retiring participant in Item 10A(1) certifies to all of the following: (1) I/we have either retired from farming or am retiring from farming within 5 years; (2) effective on the date in Item 8A, I have sold, have a contract to sell, or leased under a non-revocable long-term lease of at least 5 years, the acres identified in Item 3 to the beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer(s) or rancher(s) identified in Item 10B(1); (3) I will no longer operate the acres identified in Item 3 beginning on the date in Item 8A; and (4) the beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer(s) or rancher(s) in Item 10B(1) may: a) begin Organic Foods Production Certification, b) develop a conservation plan and install practices and initiate land improvements consistent with the conservation plan as necessary, and c) offer to enroll under continuous Conservation Reserve the acres identified in Item 3. By signing below, the beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher identified in Item 10B(1) certifies: (1) I am a beginning farmer or rancher or a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher as defined in the regulations at 7 CFR Part 1410; (2) I agree to develop and implement a conservation plan in compliance with the Conservation Compliance Provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, Pub. L. 99 - 198 (the 1985 Act), which requires completion of form AD-1026; (3) I agree to develop and implement a conservation plan that meets applicable standards for sustainable grazing and/or crop production methods on the acres identified in Item 3; (4) I understand that I may be eligible to enroll in the Conservation Stewardship Program under 7 CFR Part 14 70 or the Environmental Quality Incentives Program under 7 CFR Part 14 66, (5) I understand that I may be eligible to enroll under the continuous Conservation Reserve Program; and (6) I understand that I may begin Organic Foods Production Certification.			
10. PARTICIPANTS: (As a signatory to CRP contract _____, I agree to allow this contract to be modified under the TIP provisions.)			
A(1) RETIRED OR RETIRING FARMER OR RANCHER NAME AND ADDRESS (Zip Code):	(2) SHARE %	(3) SIGNATURE (BY):	DATE (MM-DD-YYYY)
		(4) TITLE/RELATIONSHIP (of Individual Signing in the Representative Capacity) (If more than three individuals are signing, continue on attachment.)	
B(1) BEGINNING OR SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED FARMER OR RANCHER NAME AND ADDRESS (Zip Code):	(2) SHARE %	(3) SIGNATURE (BY):	DATE (MM-DD-YYYY)
		(4) TITLE/RELATIONSHIP (of Individual Signing in the Representative Capacity) (If more than three individuals are signing, continue on attachment.)	
C(1) PARTICIPANT'S NAME AND ADDRESS (Zip Code):	(2) SHARE %	(3) SIGNATURE (BY):	DATE (MM-DD-YYYY)
		(4) TITLE/RELATIONSHIP (of Individual Signing in the Representative Capacity) (If more than three individuals are signing, continue on Page 2)	
(If more than three individuals are signing, continue on Page 2)			
11. CCC USE ONLY – Payments according to the shares are approved.		A. SIGNATURE OF CCC REPRESENTATIVE	B. DATE (MM-DD-YYYY)
<small>The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all of its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Stop 9410, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call toll-free at (866) 632-9992 (English) or (800) 877-8339 (TDD) or (866) 377-8642 (English Federal-relay) or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish Federal-relay). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.</small>			
CLOSE			