RENTED LAND: BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

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

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

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

Given this prominence, it is important to investigate whether the rental of farmland influences the use of sustainable practices. Based in Iowa, this research project examines the social dynamics between landlords, tenants, and agricultural agency professionals in order to better understand how those dynamics affect the adoption of sustainable agricultural methods on rented land.

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

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

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

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

The next stage of the research, we held four focus groups—one involving ten-

### TABLE 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP REPRESENTED</th>
<th>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm managers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa State University Extension field specialists and county directors</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Department of Natural Resources</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources Conservation Service agents and district conservationists</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenants</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlords</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary
The interviews and focus groups captured 11 common themes or barriers to the adoption of sustainable agriculture on rented land. Table 2 summarizes these 11 barriers. Judging by the responses given by landlords, tenants, and agriculture professionals, this research appears to have tapped into an issue of great salience for many involved in Iowa agriculture. Consistently, participants remarked on the "timeliness" and "great significance" of this research. In light of these remarks, it's hoped that future research will help to further identify and break down the barriers to adopting sustainable farming practices on rented land. As one tenant poignantly stated, "If sustainable agriculture is going to work, it's got to work first on rented land."

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SELF-CENSORSHIP</th>
<th>UNCERTAINTY</th>
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| Tenants expressed concern about not feeling free to discuss sustainable agriculture practices with their landlord(s) for fear of being labeled a "radical" or "rocking the boat" and thus potentially jeopardizing their future status as tenants. Consequently, there appeared to be a practice of self-censorship (or conflict avoidance) among tenants on issues pertaining to sustainable agricultural techniques. Such attitudes appeared to greatly dampen the dialogue between landlord and tenant with regard to sustainable agriculture, and with that any possible adoption of sustainable techniques. This unwillingness to communicate about alternative farm management strategies could likewise indicate a lack of trust between the two parties. As landlord absenteeism increases and as tenants continue to farm land greater distances apart there is less opportunity for tenant-landlord interaction and thus trust building and maintenance. And without this trust the tenant-landlord relationship runs the risk of becoming conflictual and purely profit driven (thus leaving no room for familial, communal, or emotional ties) (Carolon 2004).

"We talked a little about things like ridge-till and chemical application in one of our first meetings. I guess he thought I was trying to get at something because he immediately asked, 'You're not one of those organic farmers—are you?' And he didn't mean it as a compliment. Right then and there I knew that I better just do what he wanted if I wanted to make this relationship work"—Tenant

| LACK OF TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE | |
|-----------------------------||
| Iowa State Extension personnel, and agricultural professionals in general (i.e., seed and fertilizer dealers), were perceived as lacking the technical knowledge needed to make them viable sources of information for sustainable farming. Sustainable agriculture requires knowledge that conventional agriculture does not—i.e., knowledge of alternative crops, alternative fertility management, pest ecology, etc. Respondents did not feel that the so-called "experts" were sufficiently knowledgeable in these areas. As one individual stated, "conventional farmers can farm out of a compost, organic farmers have to farm with their brains" (referring to industrial agriculture's dependence on chemical inputs). Such findings are also consistent with earlier research (Korschning and Malia 1993). It appears sustainable farmers still rely heavily upon each other for information, rather than seeking information from conventional sources.

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

Endnotes
1 We derive these figures in the conventional way, which is to combine the land rented by "part owners" (that is, farmers who own and rent some land) with the land operated by "tenants" (that is, farmers who own some of the land they farm).

According to Pieper and Harl (2000), cash-rent leasing in Iowa has increased from 48.8 percent of all leasing arrangements in 1982, to 54.2 percent in 1992, to 57.1 percent in 1997, while crop share arrangements in Iowa have decreased from 48.8 percent in 1982, to 44 percent in 1992, to 38.8 percent in 1997. In December 2003 cash rent arrangements accounted for 73 percent of farmland leases in Iowa, while crop share leases had declined to 24 percent (Duffy et al., 2004).
While research has yet to examine the relationship between travel times and the adoption of low-management farming practices, Carolan (1999) found a negative relationship between time constraints and the adoption of sustainable farming practices.

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

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

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

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

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

**IS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROFITABLE?**

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

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

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

**PROBLEMS WITH CASH-RENT LEASING ARRANGEMENTS**

Cash-rent appeared to be the dominant leasing arrangement among those interviewed. Yet most respondents viewed such a leasing arrangement as largely inhospitable to the adoption of sustainable methods, due to its concentration of risk upon the tenant. Instead, the majority of tenants expressed a preference for crop-share leasing arrangements, which would spread risk evenly between the landlord and tenant and thus provide greater incentive for tenants to “take a chance” on the adoption of sustainable farming techniques.

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

When traditional leasing arrangements don’t fit sustainable practices, a few people have designed alternative leasing arrangements. For instance, a landlord who wanted the land in a rotation longer than corn-soybean described a flexible cash-renting arrangement. The landlord and tenant agreed upon a rotation which included hay, and when in hay the cash-rent was reduced by 20 percent (to help compensate for the additional equipment, labor, and management required).

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

**THE NEED TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION**

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

“I feel a person that farms sustainably really has a lot more knowledge than the chemical farmer. We buy solutions to our problems in the form of a..."
References Cited

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

| can. Sustainable farmers, however, cannot do that. They have to understand soil types, weeds, insects—you know, a jack-of-all-trades. And that knowledge is not easy to come by. I wish I had better access to it. —Tenant |
| As a landlord, I want my tenants to farm sustainably. But as long as they remain ignorant as to what it is, they’re not going to do it. That’s what Extension needs to focus more on—making such information available to the public. —Landlord |

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

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

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