

# MORE SUPPORT FOR MICHIGAN'S BEGINNING FARMERS

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**“Michigan faces the challenge of keeping farmers in farming while strengthening local and regional economies.”**

(COCCIARELLI, 2009).

From August to October, 2015, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (MSU CRFS) researchers conducted a survey to identify selected characteristics, experiences, and needs of Michigan’s beginning farmers.<sup>1</sup> The survey also was designed to help develop effective training programs for these farmers.

The 12-question paper survey was provided to the following beginning farmer groups in Michigan: the

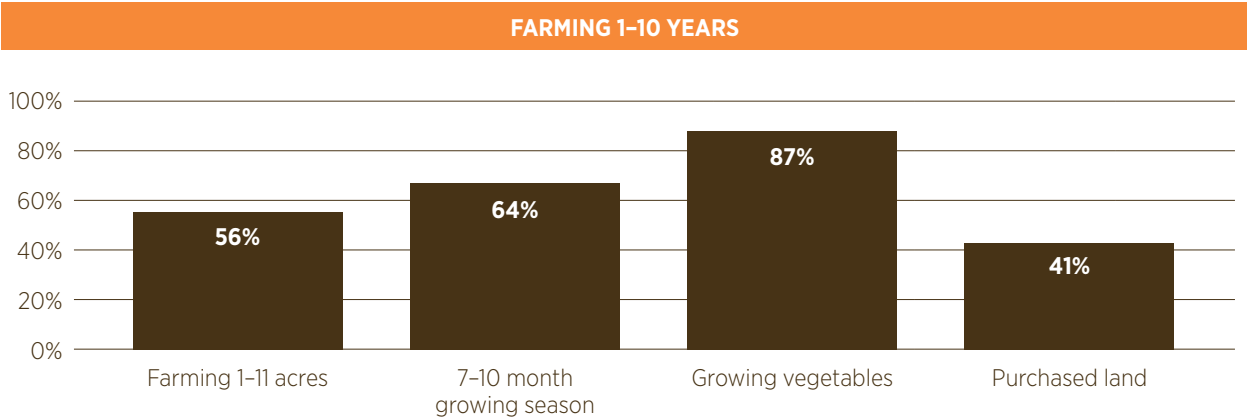
<sup>1</sup> The survey was part of a collaborative project between the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (MSU CRFS), Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS) and MSU Student Organic Farm, under the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Grant #2015-70017-22856.

2015 cohort of MSU Student Organic Farmer Training Program; those attending two beginning farmers workshops held at the MSU Student Organic Farm; and attendees at one workshop at the Women in Agriculture (WIA) Network located in Genesee County. The same survey was also released online.

Survey topics addressed farming experience; experiences with land accessibility; awareness and desire to know more about financial capital; and desired workshop topics for future beginning farmer programming. The majority of the questions were multiple-choice options. In total, farmers with active farms completed 150 surveys; 72% of the respondents have been farming from 1-10 years, the USDA definition of beginning farmers.

Among those farming from 1-10 years, 56% are farming 1-11 acres; 64% have a 7-10 month growing season; 87% are growing vegetables; and 41% have purchased their land. These were the most frequently selected responses by the beginning farmer survey participants. The table below illustrates key insights regarding the intersections of farm scale with farm type, growing season, and land acquisition.

## Beginning Farmers in Michigan Across Farm Scale, Growing Season, Farm Type, and Land Acquisition



## Key Insights Regarding the Intersection of Farm Scale with Farm Type, Growing Season, and Land Acquisition

< 1 ACRE	%	1-11 ACRES	%	11-50 ACRES	%	> 50 ACRES	%
Grow vegetables	93	Grow vegetables	91	Grow vegetables	82	Raise livestock	61
7-10 month growing season	65	7-10 month growing season	66	Less than 7 month growing season	36	7-10 month growing season	75
Purchased land	31	Purchased land	48	Purchased land and rent land for free from family or friend	45	n/a	n/a

Among farmers growing on less than one acre, 93% are growing vegetables; 65% have been growing 7-10 months; and 31% have purchased their land.

For those growing on 1-11 acres, 91% are growing vegetables; 66% have been growing 7-10 months; and 48% have purchased their land.

In the group of farmers growing on 11-50 acres, 82% are growing vegetables; 36% have been growing less than 7 months; and 45% have purchased their land and obtained free land from a family member or friend.

Among those growing on more than 50 acres, 61% raise livestock and 75% have been farming 7-10 months.

When asked about services, support, or desired resources in a land access program in Michigan, farmers' top three responses reflected the pressing need to find land. More than half, 54%, are interested in land trusts, conservation, and easements; 53% identified finding land and connecting with landowners; and 52% noted land access options and strategies.

**“Access to financial capital is one of the largest determinants of beginning farmer business startup and sustainability.”**

(COCCIARELLI ET AL., 2010, CARROT PROJECT, 2008).

When asked about possible topics that would address the function and profitability of farm businesses, farmers' top three responses pinpointed a combination of production farm businesses (58%), business planning (56%), and season extension (53%).

When asked about sources of financial capital, farmers' responses indicated that they knew about traditional sources of financial capital access, but wanted to know more about traditional and alternative financial capital sources. About half, 53%, are aware of family and friend loans and credit cards; 49% would like to know more about Hoophouses for Health;<sup>2</sup> and 44% were interested in community-based financing and in federal loans.

<sup>2</sup> A project of the Michigan Farmers Market Association and MSU CRFS.

## Key Insights Regarding Experiences and Needs of Beginning Farmers

FINANCIAL CAPITAL AWARENESS	%	FINANCIAL CAPITAL LEARNING	%	LAND ACCESS SERVICES	%	WANTED WORKSHOPS	%
Family and friend loans	53	Hoophouses for Health	49	Land trusts, conservation, and easements	54	Scaling up farm businesses	58
Credit cards	53	Community-based financing	44	Finding land and connecting with landowners	53	Business planning	56
Federal loans	52	Federal loans	44	Land access options and strategies	52	Season extension	53

### “Access to farmland affects the number of beginning farmers, and access is affected by competition for land.”

(AHORN AND NEWTON, 2009).

This survey shows that most beginning farmers in Michigan have purchased their land and are small vegetable farmers growing 7-10 months. These farmers are most aware of traditional financial capital sources (i.e. credit cards, federal loans, etc.) and are eager to learn more about both traditional and alternative financial capital sources (e.g. community-based financing).

Overall, there is interest in more beginning farmer support addressing land access services, and the function and profitability of farm businesses. Through the USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Grant (BFRDG) program, the organizational entities mentioned above are providing key support for beginning farmer viability in Michigan. They are offering intensive farmer training, and evaluation of mechanisms assessing impact of programs, among other strategies.

For more information, visit [www.foodsystems.msu.edu](http://www.foodsystems.msu.edu) or contact Shakara Tyler at [tylersh1@msu.edu](mailto:tylersh1@msu.edu).

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