



# Michigan Food & Farming Systems - MIFFS

*Supporting the Many Faces of Farming*

## Why is Land Access Critical? Bridging the Gap between food, health and land.

“There is no connection between food and health. People are fed by a food industry which pays no attention to health and are healed by a health industry that pays no attention to food.” Wendell Berry

Diet-related chronic disease rates are escalating in the United States, while the public’s health is further threatened by the loss of farmers and ranchers as more and more producers retiring without a succession plan. Even worse, access to land has been a top challenge for farmers.<sup>i</sup> The cost of land is increasing while the amount of available land is decreasing.<sup>ii</sup> <sup>iii</sup> Without available land and farmers, the future of agriculture and the public’s health is in jeopardy.

A history of poor eating has a cumulative effect and have contributed to significant nutrition-related health challenges that now face the U.S. population. About half of all American adults—117 million individuals—have one or more preventable chronic diseases, many of which are related to poor quality eating patterns and physical inactivity.<sup>iv</sup> These include cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, and poor bone health. More than two-thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children and youth are overweight or obese.<sup>v</sup> These high rates of overweight and obesity and chronic disease have persisted for more than two decades and come not only with increased health risks, but also at high cost. In 2008, the medical costs associated with obesity were estimated to be \$147 billion.<sup>vi</sup> In 2012, the total estimated cost of diagnosed diabetes was \$245 billion, including \$176 billion in direct medical costs and \$69 billion in decreased productivity.<sup>vii</sup>

Concurrent with these diet-related health problems persisting at high levels, trends in food intake over time show that, at the population level, Americans are not engaging in healthy eating patterns. Just 13% of Americans consume the recommended amount of fruit every day and less than 9% consume the recommended amount of vegetables.<sup>viii</sup>

However, our country doesn’t have enough of the vegetables we are supposed to eat. Nearly 50% of vegetables available in 2013 were either tomatoes or potatoes.<sup>ix</sup> So while it is recommended that adults consume two to three cups of vegetables a day, only 1.7 cups are available per person.<sup>x</sup> The vegetable supply would need to increase by 70% for Americans to meet the recommended daily amounts.<sup>xi</sup>

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, “Only about 2% of U.S. farmland is used to grow fruits and vegetables, while 59% is devoted to commodity crops. But this situation isn’t just bad for our waistslines—it’s also holding back farmers and rural economies, and hurting the quality of life in farm communities and beyond.”<sup>xii</sup> If Americans ate the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables, this in

turn would drive changes in farming practices that would build healthier soil, improve air and water quality, and increase access to fresh, affordable, healthy foods in farm communities. It would also be good for farmers, as recent studies have shown that more diverse, local food systems create jobs and increase farm profits.<sup>xiii</sup>

Unfortunately, Michigan, with nearly 10 million acres of land in agriculture (2012 Census of Agriculture), lost over 83,000 acres of farmland between 2007 and 2012. 80% of all rented farmland is owned by non-farming landlords (TOTAL 2014 Survey). This has implications for how landowners relate to their land and their farm tenants. And while the average age of Michigan farmers is over 57 years old, the average age of farm landlords is over 65. Older farmers and landowners are not adequately prepared or supported to transfer their farms and farmland. Within the next ten years, approximately 35% of all Michigan farmers anticipate retiring. This encompasses 472,000 acres of farmland. Less than half (38%) will pass on their farm as one unit to one heir (Michigan Farm Succession Survey, 2012). If farmers and landowners are not able to develop a farm succession plan, the land will be used for non-farming purposes and therefore lower the land use pool for farmers.

Let's meet Clay Blackburn. He is a 25-year-old Missouri farmer who works several part-time jobs to keep his cow/calf operation growing. He currently leases 200 acres of land until he can build enough capital to buy. Clay: "It's tough for a young person to get started in farming. Finding land is the most difficult thing, but I'm determined to eventually make this my full-time job."<sup>xiv</sup> Clay's experience is very common among beginning farmers who are trying to get their foot in the door.

Data from the USDA's Census of Agriculture and Agricultural Resource Management Surveys on beginning farmers and ranchers in the United States shows a steady decline over the past 20 years.

Michigan agriculture is very diverse—with many types of farms, farmers and farm products. This is critical for the health of the population. However, with the loss of land available for farming, Michigan will not be able to supply the foods that are necessary for the health of the country. For Michigan agriculture to thrive into the future, land must be available, affordable and appropriate for current and future generations of producers. Securing the future of Michigan agriculture involves many stakeholders and actions. Regarding land, farmers need support to find and acquire land. Private landowners need to be encouraged and supported to make land available for farming and to partner with farmers to promote security and land stewardship. Older farmers need assistance to transfer their farms and to prepare for a secure exit from their farming careers.

Currently in Michigan, the Michigan Food and Farming System (MIFFS) and Michigan's land grant institution, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, are working on creating resources and services for new and beginning farmers looking for land. Additionally, they are working with farmers transitioning into retirement to allow more land to stay in the hands of farmers. To learn more, visit the MIFFS website: [http://www.miffs.org/services/beginning\\_farmers/land\\_access\\_program](http://www.miffs.org/services/beginning_farmers/land_access_program).

Land for agricultural purposes is critical to our nation's health.

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<sup>i</sup> MIFFS

<sup>ii</sup> 2012 Census of Agriculture

<sup>iii</sup> NASS

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- <sup>iv</sup> Ward BW, Schiller JS, Goodman RA. Multiple chronic conditions among US adults: a 2012 update. *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2014;11:130389. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd11.130389>.
- <sup>v</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NCHS Obesity Data. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/factsheets/factsheet\\_obesity.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/factsheets/factsheet_obesity.htm).
- <sup>vi</sup> Finkelstein EA, Trogdon JG, Cohen JW, Dietz W. Annual medical spending attributable to obesity: payer- and service-specific estimates. *Health Aff.* 2009;28(5):w822-31. <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/28/5/w822.full.html>.
- <sup>vii</sup> American Diabetes Association. *Diabetes Care.* 2013 Apr;36(4):1033-46. doi: 10.2337/dc12-2625.
- <sup>viii</sup> National Cancer Institute. Usual dietary intakes: food intakes, US population, 2007–10. Available at <http://appliedresearch.cancer.gov/diet/usualintakes/pop/2007-10>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Bentley J, Kantor L. Food Availability (Per Capita) Data System. USDA Economic Research Service. December 2016.
- <sup>x</sup> See viii
- <sup>xi</sup> Krebs-Smith SM, Reedy J, Bosire C. Healthfulness of the U.S. Food Supply. *Am J Prev Med.* 2010 May; 38(5): 472–477.
- <sup>xii</sup> Mulik K and O'Hara JK. Union of Concerned Scientists. The Healthy Farmland Diet: How Growing Less Corn Would Improve Our Health and Help American's Heartland. October 2013. [www.ucsusa.org/healthyfarmlanddiet](http://www.ucsusa.org/healthyfarmlanddiet).
- <sup>xiii</sup> See xii
- <sup>xiv</sup> Brown T. Access to Land, Capital Biggest Obstacle for Beginning Farmers. 2013. <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2013/01/31/access-land-capital-biggest-obstacle-beginning-farmers>.