

Introduction

Iowa farmers and their families have concerns about the impacts of many changes affecting rural areas from energy costs and quality of life to relations with neighbors and environmental quality related to livestock operations. The 2006 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll asked questions about these issues and other topics such as Internet access and use.

Created in 1982 between Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, the poll partners Extension and research programs with the needs of farm families. Data collected on issues of importance to the farming community provide input to local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making process. We thank the many farm families who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the poll.

Methods

Questionnaires were mailed to a statewide panel of 1,662 farm operators, with reminder postcards and replacement questionnaires sent to maximize survey response rate. Usable responses received from 1,203 operators resulted in a 72 percent response rate. Nine percent of respondents were female, and the overall respondent median age was 63. This report summarizes this year's poll findings. Additional copies of this or any previous year's report is

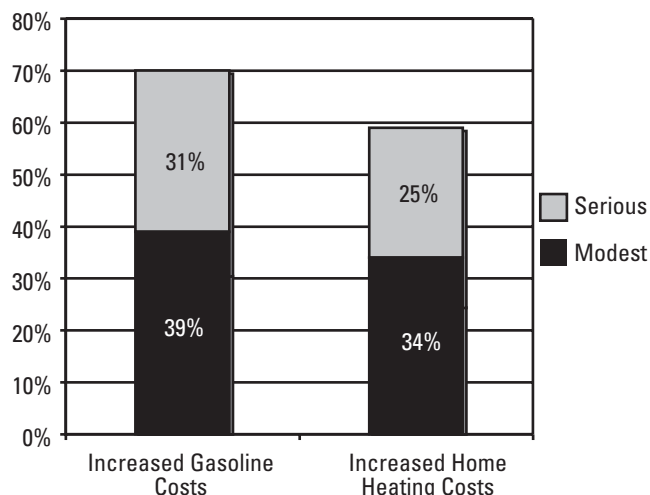
available from your local county Extension office, from the Extension Distribution Center at Iowa State University, or from the authors.

Highlights from the 2006 Farm Poll

Impact of Energy Costs

A focus of this year's report is farm and household economic well-being, especially the impact of increasing energy costs. Increased gasoline prices were seen producing a modest financial hardship in 39 percent of households surveyed whereas 31 percent of producers considered it a serious financial hardship (Figure 1). Increased home heating costs were noted as

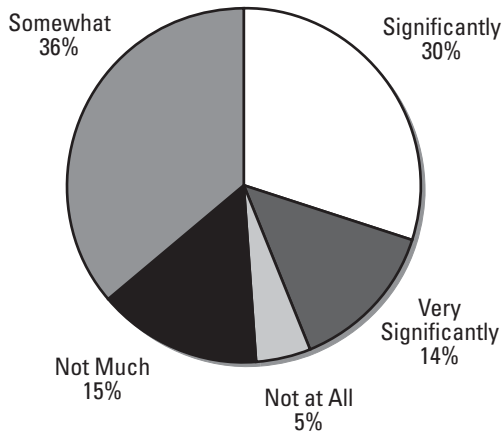
Figure 1. Percentage Indicating a Modest or More Serious Financial Hardship from Increased Energy Costs



a modest financial hardship by 34 percent and 25 percent called it serious.

Farmers seemed interested in meeting their energy needs through alternative sources. All told, 44 percent considered the higher cost of energy to have significantly or very significantly affected their farming operations while 36 percent noted it as somewhat of a factor (Figure 2).

Figure 2. How Significantly Higher Energy Costs are Perceived to Affect the Farming Operation



Fifty percent of Iowa farmers reported already using ethanol and nearly one-third (30 percent) already use biodiesel (Table 1). In addition, most farmers not already using these two fuels expressed a strong interest in them. Fifty-

six percent of farmers polled indicated strong interest in wind power. Solar power, biomass, and methane were mentioned by two-thirds or more farmers as avenues of possible future interest. This indicates that Iowa farmers may be eager to research and use alternative energy sources, although only 22 percent responded that they were actually interested in switching to growing an alternative energy crop (Table 2).

Most farmers agreed or strongly agreed on the importance of the U.S. reducing its dependence on foreign oil (94 percent), that more alternatives are needed to solve energy problems (89 percent), and that growing corn to produce ethanol is a good way to help the environment (84 percent). Many of the reasons given for alternative sources seem to be driven by the desire to reduce costs (such as farming techniques—88 percent), yet the majority of respondents (57 percent) felt that short-term sacrifices in the environment may need to be made in order to solve the energy crisis. Interest among farmers appeared high for supporting ways to reduce fossil fuel use on their farms (69 percent). Farmers also indicated a strong interest in finding alternatives to commercial fertilizers (63 percent).

Little agreement exists on emphasizing con-

Table 1. Interest in Alternative Energy Sources

	<u>No Interest</u>	<u>Some Interest</u>	<u>Strong Interest</u>	<u>Already Use</u>
	- Percentage -			
Ethanol.....	2	12	36	50
Biodiesel.....	4	16	49	30
Solar power.....	17	48	33	2
Wind power.....	8	35	56	1
Biomass.....	30	46	23	1
Methane.....	35	47	18	<1

Table 2. Energy-related Issues

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following energy-related issues?	Disagree		Agree or
	Strongly Disagree	Uncertain	Strongly Agree
	- Percentage -		
It is critically important that the U.S. reduce its dependence on foreign sources of oil.....	2	4	94
More alternatives are needed to help solve energy problems.....	3	8	89
I am interested in finding farming techniques that reduce my energy costs	2	10	88
Growing corn to produce ethanol is a good way to help the	5	11	84
Biofuel production plants provide good jobs for people in Iowa....	3	18	79
It is important for farmers to reduce the use of fossil fuels on their farms.....	7	24	69
I am interested in exploring alternatives to commercial fertilizers....	10	27	63
I believe local ethanol or biodiesel plants are good investments for my money	6	35	59
I think it is important for farmers to invest in facilities to manufacture biofuels from my crops.....	9	35	56
We may have to make some short-term sacrifices in the environment to solve the energy crisis, such as burning more coal.....	17	26	57
I would sell crop residues if it were possible to manufacture biofuels out of those materials	14	35	51
I believe laws should be passed requiring the biofuel production facilities to provide investment opportunities for local residents and farmers	18	32	50
I worry about too much "outside money" coming in to Iowa to build biofuel plants	23	32	45
Solving U.S. energy problems is more important than meeting global food needs.....	24	36	41
Not enough information on energy-efficient farming is available to me to make any significant changes in my farm business.....	29	35	36
More emphasis should be put on energy conservation than on using crops for fuel.....	34	34	32
Too much emphasis is being placed on ethanol to solve energy problems	52	24	24
I am interested in switching from growing corn or soybeans to growing an alternative crop for energy production	22	56	22
I view crops as a source of food or feed, not as an energy source .	67	17	17
I worry about the social and environmental impacts of biofuel production.....	51	36	13

servation over fuel use for crops. Although a majority (67 percent) viewed crops as an energy source as well as a source of food or feed, only 13 percent worried about the social and environmental costs of biofuel production. At the same time, 59 percent saw ethanol or biodiesel plants as good investments, and an almost equal number believed it is important for farmers to invest in such facilities (56 percent). Many worried about too much “outside money” coming in to build biofuel plants (45 percent), and they believed laws should be passed to provide those investment opportunities to local residents (50 percent).

Quality of Life

About one-half of respondents believed quality of life has or will continue to remain the same except for the overall prospect of rural Iowans (Table 3). Only one-third believed prospects for rural Iowans will remain the same and nearly one-half felt prospects will become worse or much worse. Approximately one-tenth fewer respondents in 2006 than in 1996 believed that quality of life for their own and other families in their community has improved over the past five years or that it will improve for other families over the next five years.

Respondents considered financial well-being a problem for farmers in their area. Thirty-five percent believed other farmers’ current financial well-being to be a slight problem, and 42 percent considered it a moderate or serious problem (Table 4). Agribusiness firms were seen as being similarly affected. Thirty-six percent of farmers indicated the financial well-being of agribusiness firms a slight problem and 35 percent a moderate or serious problem. Financial institutions were considered strong by most respondents with more than one-half (56 percent) indicating no perceived problem. Forty-two percent reported no problems in financial well-being on their own farms whereas 32 percent reported a slight problem and 24 percent a moderate or serious problem. Financial problem perceptions have not changed much over the last decade. The greatest change was a seven percent increase in the number of producers who felt agribusiness firms were having moderate or serious financial problems.

Trust, dependability, and help, when needed, are traditional hallmarks of rural communities. Although few farm operators (29 percent) referred to their neighborhood as closely knit and nearly all (92 percent) responded that people don’t depend upon each other like they once

Table 3. Family and Community Quality of Life, 2006 and 1996

	Become Much Worse or Somewhat Worse		Remained the Same		Become Somewhat Better or Much Better	
	2006	1996	2006	1996	2006	1996
	- Percentage -					
During the past five years,						
Has the quality of life for families in your community	26	30	54	42	20	28
Has the quality of life for your family.....	17	16	52	45	29	39
In the next five years,						
Will the quality of life for families in your community	32	14	49	53	19	33
Will the quality of life for your family.....	22	29	53	50	25	21
Will the overall economic prospects for rural Iowans	49	43	33	33	19	24

Table 4. Financial Well-Being, 2006 and 1996

	<u>Not Sure</u>		<u>Not a Problem</u>		<u>Slight Problem</u>		<u>Moderate or Serious Problem</u>	
	- Percentage -							
	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>
How do you feel about the current financial well-being of:								
Farmers in your area	6	8	17	14	35	34	42	44
Agribusiness firms in your area	8	9	21	26	36	37	35	28
Financial institutions in your area	8	9	56	60	21	19	15	11
Your own farm	2	2	42	49	32	28	24	21

did, most (71 percent) indicated that when a need arises, neighbors are there for assistance (Table 5). Moreover, 72 percent stated that they can count on neighbors for help when needed.

Loss of neighboring, in part, may stem from changes in farming. Seventy percent of respondents saw new farming technology replacing

the need for neighbors' help. Another factor could be that farmers themselves (a 56 percent majority) are not as active in community affairs as they believe they should be. About one-half (54 percent) only see neighbors when they drive past their neighbors' farm, and they were so busy, no time was left for visiting neighbors (50 percent). Only 29 percent agreed

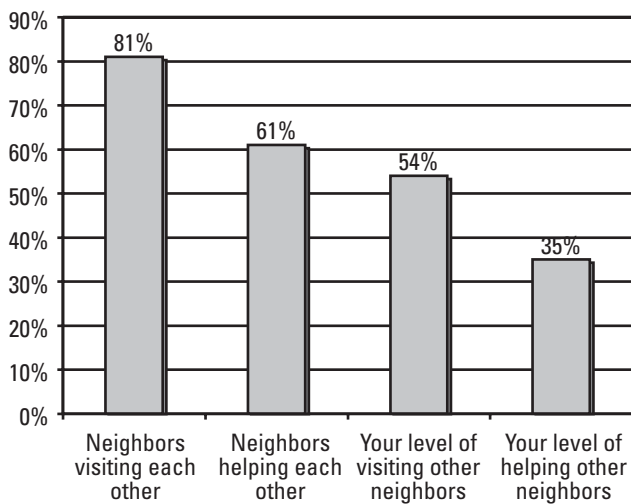
Table 5. Sense of Community and Neighborhood, 2006 and 1996

	<u>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</u>		<u>Uncertain</u>		<u>Agree or Strongly Agree</u>	
	- Percentage -					
	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>1996</u>
People don't depend upon each other like they once did	4	6	4	3	92	91
I can always count on my neighbors if I need help .	10	12	19	14	72	74
Whenever someone in our community needs help, there are always plenty of neighbors willing to help	8	9	22	13	71	78
Farmers are so well equipped today that few farmers need their neighbors help.....	17	22	13	9	70	69
I am not as active in community affairs as I should be	26	26	8	13	56	61
About the only time I see my neighbors is when they drive past my farm	36	35	9	6	54	59
I am so busy these days I don't seem to have time to visit with my neighbors.....	36	30	13	8	50	62
It is difficult to get people to volunteer to help on community projects.....	23	22	27	19	50	59
People don't seem as willing to help each other as they once did.....	37	35	18	12	45	53
Our neighborhood is closely knit	41	40	30	22	29	37

or strongly agreed that their neighborhood is closely knit. Where changes in perceptions have occurred between 1996 and 2006 the changes seem to be toward less agreement and more uncertainty in both positive and negative perceptions.

Face-to-face communication has decreased between neighbors as indicated by rates of visiting neighbors. Eighty-one percent of farmers agreed that neighbors visiting each other has greatly or somewhat declined in the past 10 years, and most (54 percent) agreed their own level of visiting declined as well (Figure 3). A substantial number (61 percent) also noted a decline in neighbors helping each other.

Figure 3. Percentage Indicating a Great Decline or Somewhat of a Decline in Neighboring Over the Past 10 Years



Livestock Issues

One part of the rural Iowa landscape that impacts quality of life is the presence of livestock. About 44 percent of respondents own livestock and/or poultry. Additionally, many respondents reported that neighboring farms include some type of livestock as part of their operations. Almost half (48 percent) responded that the closest livestock facility had been in existence for over ten years. Forty percent reported that the facility is one-half mile or less in distance, and

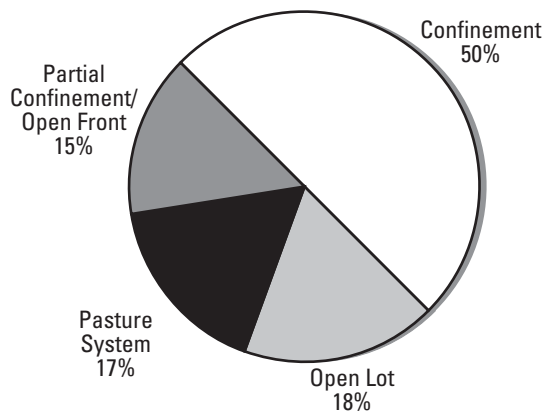
about one-quarter of the respondents indicated the facility is between one-half and one mile in distance (Table 6).

Table 6. Distance of Closest Livestock Facility

Less than one-quarter of a mile	18%
Between one-quarter and one-half mile ..	22%
Between one-half and one mile	24%
Between 1 and 2 miles.....	22%
More than 2 miles	14%

One-half of these facilities were described as confinement operations with the remaining one-half almost equally divided among open lot (18 percent), pasture (17 percent), and partial confinement/open front (15 percent) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Closest Livestock Facility Description



Farm operators were asked to classify the facility closest to their farm as a feeding floor for hogs, layer operation, farrowing facility, broiler/turkey grower facility, dairy operation or cattle feedlot (Figure 5). About two-thirds were divided between layer operations (37 percent) and farrowing facilities (32 percent). From another perspective, about one-half of the facilities were related to swine production (32 percent farrowing and 17 percent hog feeding).

Figure 5. Type of Nearest Livestock Facility

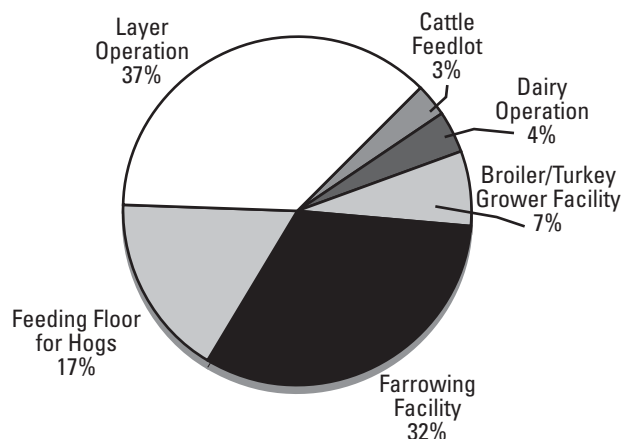
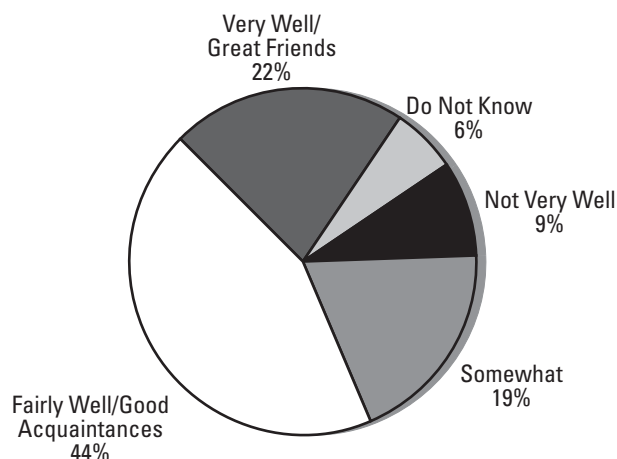


Table 7 shows the estimated sizes of the nearest livestock and poultry facilities. Farmers with some type of swine production facility nearby estimated those operations as being larger than the other types of livestock operations.

Most farmers reported that they know the owners/operators of nearby livestock facilities. Almost half (44 percent) considered them-

selves as fairly good acquaintances with nearby owners/operators of livestock and/or poultry facilities. Twenty-two percent even considered them to be great friends (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Familiarity with the Owner/Operator



Few problems resulting from the nearby livestock or poultry operation are noted by farmers (Table 8). About one-fifth or fewer of the

Table 7. Size Estimate of Nearest Livestock Facility

Type	Small	Medium	Large
	- Percent -		
Feeding Floor for hogs.....	23	45	32
Layer Operation	42	30	28
Farrowing Facility	27	47	26
Broiler/turkey grower facility	59	22	18
Dairy operation	47	38	15
Cattle feedlot.....	59	35	6

Table 8. Livestock Operation Problems

Does the nearest livestock operation create any of the following problems?	Not a Problem	Minor Nuisance	Moderate or Serious Problem
	- Percentage -		
Noise.....	85	12	3
Dust.....	80	14	5
Manure run-off.....	78	14	8
Flies.....	67	23	10
Odors from manure storage.....	54	32	15
Odors from manure application.....	43	36	21

respondents considered odors from manure storage or application to be a moderate or serious problem, with about one-third considering them to be a minor nuisance. Noise, dust, manure run-off, and flies were not seen as problems by large percentages of respondents. When asked how many days per year they would tolerate odors from such an operation before considering it a severe problem, the median time reported was 42 days.

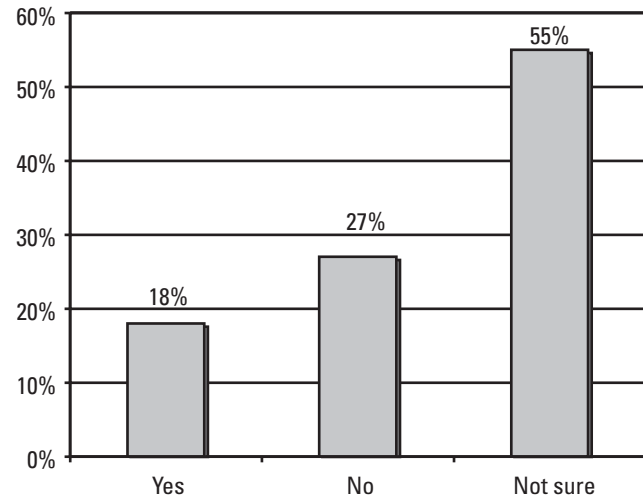
Producers also were asked about the impact of the livestock or poultry operation on residential property values, farmland values, and quality of life in their neighborhood. Few respondents indicated any negative impacts. Ninety percent reported no impact to neighborhood farmland values, 83 percent indicated no effect in residential property values, and 78 percent saw no change in their quality of life. Sixteen percent did note a decrease in residential property values and 20 percent felt some decrease in quality of life.

The majority of farmers reported the neighbor's livestock or poultry operations as either not a problem or only a minor nuisance. If a problem did exist, however, Iowa farmers were not apt to discuss it with the owner. Eighty-six percent of those who felt there was a problem reported not talking to the operator about the issue. Furthermore, the majority of respondents perceiving a problem (55 percent) indicated they were not sure if the owner had attempted to remedy the problem (Figure 7).

Internet Usage

Information is key for strategic business planning and decision-making, and through the Internet many businesses stay up-to-date. The majority of Iowa farmers (67 percent) have internet access at home. Iowa farm households use the Internet just over 10 hours on average per week. Only 39 percent of farm families in the sample have a high speed connection; the other 61 percent connect through dial up.

Figure 7. Has the Owner/Operator Attempted to Remedy the Problem?



Farm family use of the Internet appears to be more personal than farm business related (Table 9). The most frequent use of the Internet seems to be for keeping the household budget based on reported use of several times weekly or daily by 48 percent of respondent households. The Internet's social function may be even greater, however, considering that 47 percent mentioned using the Internet for keeping in touch with relatives or friends either daily or several times weekly, and an additional 33 percent mentioned using it weekly for this purpose. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents' families use the Internet searching for information on topics of need or interest.

Also of note are categories where usage is minimal. Categories possibly requiring some type of online financial transaction were most often in the "No/Never" use category. Seventy percent never pay bills online, three-fourths (73 percent) never buy or sell personal merchandise online, and two-thirds (67 percent) never buy or sell household merchandise online. The exception to this seems to be booking and purchasing travel. Although they use it infrequently for this purpose, 78 percent of respondents' families do use the Internet for

booking and purchasing travel. Also, 46 percent of households reported using the Internet for selecting electronic equipment, and nearly half (49 percent) reported using the Internet to purchase farm equipment or machinery. This is significant considering these are large, infrequent purchases.

Primary farming-related purposes for the Internet included gathering information on weather and the markets, as indicated by 46 and 38 percent, respectively. Producers use the Internet for these purposes several times weekly or daily (Table 10). Few indicate frequent use of the Internet for production or management

purposes, although 61 percent do use the Internet for accessing crop production information. About one-half or more of producers never use the Internet for information on pest management, soil and water conservation, farm financial management, reducing energy costs, sustainable practices, and livestock production.

When asked if they ever used the Internet for seeking information or advice from other producers or from farm organizations, only about one-third (36 percent) responded that they use the Internet to seek information or advice from farm organizations and even fewer (20 percent) from other producers.

Do you or members of your family use the Internet for...	No/ Never	Less than Weekly	Weekly	Several Times Weekly or Daily
	- Percentage -			
Keeping a household budget.....	11	23	18	48
Keeping in touch with relatives or friends.....	5	15	33	47
Searching for information on other topics of need or interest.....	4	33	34	28
Playing video games	54	21	9	16
Learning about a hobby	30	48	12	10
Helping with children’s homework	61	17	13	9
Subscribing to a special interest (such as a newsletter, chat room or blog).....	61	21	9	9
Seeking health and medical information.....	17	60	17	6
Paying bills	70	19	7	4
Booking and/or purchasing travel	22	69	7	3
Buying new or used farm equipment or machinery	52	40	6	3
Selecting electronic equipment including computers	55	39	4	3
Buying or selling household merchandise (such as furniture or appliances).....	67	28	4	1
Buying or selling personal merchandise (such as clothing, cosmetics or jewelry).....	73	23	3	1
Buying or selling a vehicle (such as a car, boat or RV)	67	32	1	<1

Do you ever use the Internet for the following types of farming information?	No/ Never	Less than Weekly	Weekly	Several Times Weekly or Daily
	- Percentage -			
Weather	16	21	17	46
Market information	24	22	15	38
Crop production	39	38	14	9
Farm financial management	54	33	8	6
Livestock production	65	26	5	4
Soil and water conservation	50	41	6	3
Pest management	47	43	8	2
Reducing energy costs	57	38	4	3
Sustainable farming practices	60	35	3	2

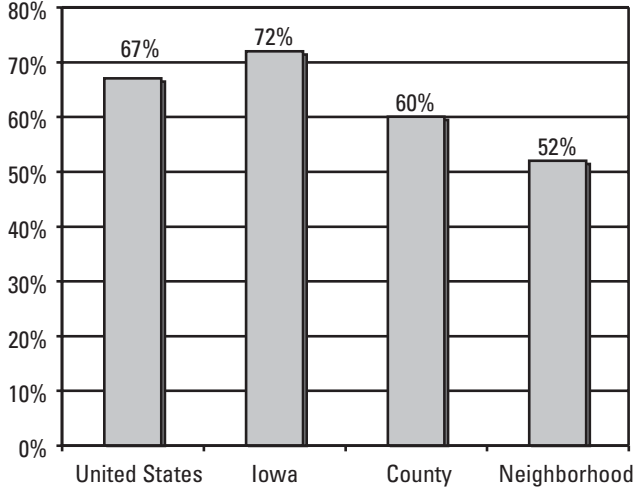
General Social Issues

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll has a history of tracking farmer response on general social issues and their impact on rural life. Iowa farmers were asked about issues and concerns that impact U.S. citizens beyond rural boundaries. These issues included loss of rural population, loss of jobs, crime, and decline in ethical standards and the work ethic.

Previous polls have consistently shown that Iowa farmers typically see social issues as more significant at the national than at the state or local level. These patterns held in this year’s poll with the exception of loss of rural population. Figure 8 indicates rural population loss was perceived as a more severe problem in Iowa than across the U.S. (72 percent vs. 67 percent).

Moreover, 60 percent reported it as a moderate or severe problem at the county level and 52 percent as moderate or severe in their neighborhood. Rural population loss was the only issue that garnered more than 50 percent “moderate or severe problem” responses in all geographical categories.

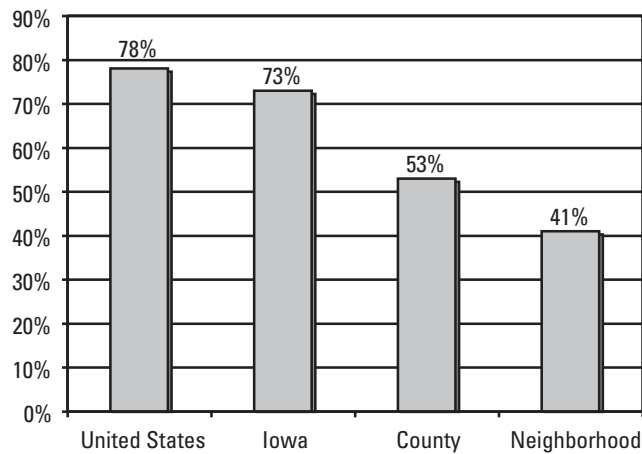
Figure 8. Loss of Rural Population is a Moderate or Severe Problem in . . .



Although farm operators did not consider loss of jobs as severe a problem as loss of rural population, a substantial number (41 percent) felt it was a moderate to severe problem in their neighborhoods (Figure 9).

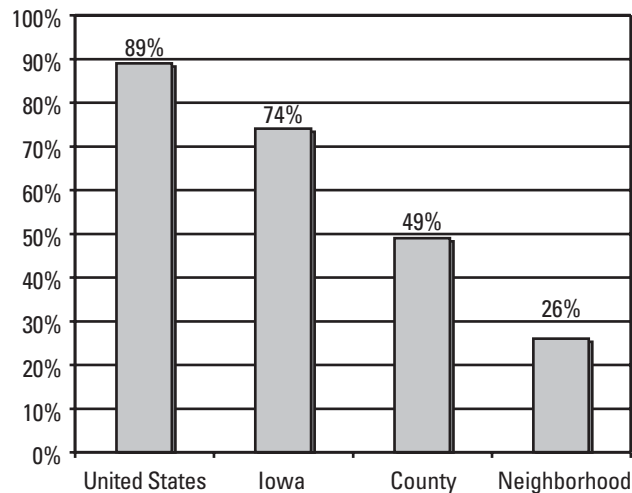
Crime was perceived as the most severe national problem but the least severe local problem. Most Iowa farmers (89 percent) agreed that it is a moderate or severe problem in the U.S., but only one-fourth (26 percent) per-

Figure 9. Loss of Jobs is a Moderate or Severe Problem in . . .



ceived it as a moderate or severe problem in their neighborhoods (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Crime is a Moderate or Severe Problem in . . .



Decline in both ethical standards and the work ethic were perceived as highly significant

problems in the U.S. (85 percent and 82 percent respectively), but only about one-third of producers (35 percent each) consider these severe local problems (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11. Decline in Ethical Standards is a Moderate or Severe Problem in . . .

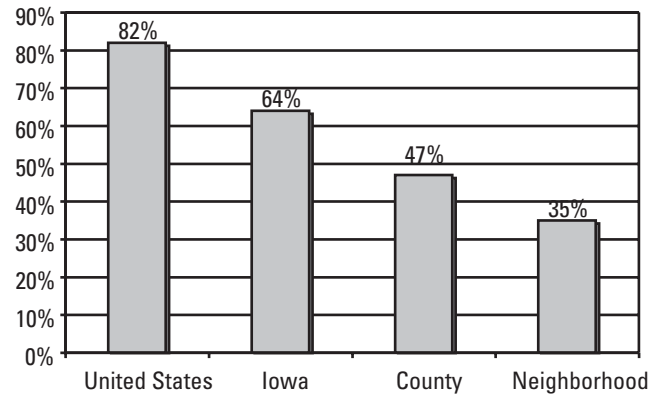
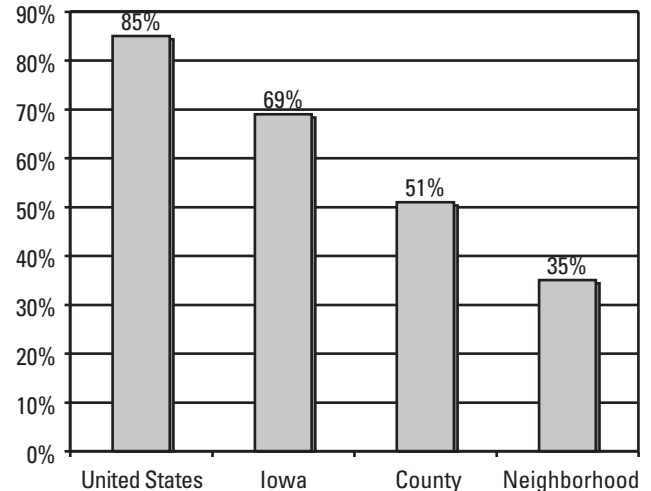


Figure 12. Decline in the Work Ethic is a Moderate or Severe Problem in . . .



Prepared by Peter Korsching, professor, Paul Lasley, extension sociologist, and Trevalyn Gruber. Leslie Daub and Del Marks provided valuable layout assistance to the questionnaire and this report. The Iowa Department of Land Stewardship, Division of Statistics, assisted in the data collection.

File: Communities 9-3

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