



# 2012 Summary Report

## Introduction

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey of Iowa farm families that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, this is the Farm Poll's 30<sup>th</sup> year. It is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (ISUEO), the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), and the Iowa Agricultural Statistics Service are active partners in the Farm Poll. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farm families who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll.

## Who Participates?

The 2012 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in February to a statewide panel of 2,219 farm operators. Usable surveys were

received from 1,296 farmers, resulting in a response rate of 58 percent. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old. Most Farm Poll participants draw a significant proportion of their overall household income from farming. Fifty-one percent of participants reported that farm income made up more than half of their 2011 household income, and an additional 18 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from the farm operation.

This year's survey focused on a range of issues that are important not only to agriculture but to all Iowans. Topics include farmer perspectives on increases in land values, assessments of rural quality of life and other rural issues, use of different sources of information for agricultural decision making, and preferences for delivery of extension information and educational programming. Other topics included use of communications technology and concern about herbicide resistant weeds.

Copies of this or any other year's reports are available from your local county Extension office, the Extension Distribution Center (store. extension.iastate.edu/), Extension Sociology (www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll), or from the authors.

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# Highlights from 2012 Farm Poll

## Land Values

The value of farmland in Iowa and across the region has risen steeply over the past few years. The 2012 Farm Poll posed three sets of questions on land values. The first questions focused on farmer perspectives regarding the future trajectory of land values and farm income. The second set of questions asked farmers to provide their opinions about the relative importance of several factors that are driving increases in land values. The third question set asked farmers to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements regarding the potential impacts of rising land values on farming.

### The future of land values

Many farmers appear to believe that farmland is overvalued. More than two-thirds of farmers agreed with the statements, “land values are too high and cannot be sustained at these levels,” and “land values are currently much higher than the land is actually worth” (table 1).

Forty-eight percent agreed that “the farmland market is in a bubble that will eventually burst and lead to major drops in values” (table 1). Just 10 percent believed that land values would continue to rise at double-digit rates.

Other farmers were more optimistic, with forty-one percent agreeing that land values would continue to rise, but at a slower pace (table 1). Further, 60 percent of survey participants agreed that quality Iowa cropland is still a good investment.

### Drivers of increases

Farmers were asked to rate the influence that a number of factors have had on the recent escalation of land values on a five-point scale ranging from “no influence” to “very strong influence.” Respondents rated high grain prices as the most influential factor driving increases in land values (table 2). Following in importance as a major driver was competition between local farmers who want to expand their land base.

Several items focused on farmland as an investment. Two-thirds (66 percent) of farmers indicated that low returns on other types

**Table 1. The future of land values**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
— Percentage —					
Land values are too high and cannot be sustained at these levels .....	2	7	23	40	28
Land values are currently much higher than the land is actually worth .....	2	11	22	43	23
Quality Iowa cropland is still a good investment.....	2	8	30	50	10
The farmland market is in a bubble that will eventually burst and lead to <u>major</u> drops in values .....	1	15	36	38	10
Land values will continue to climb, but more slowly.....	1	12	46	39	2
Crop prices will stay level or continue to increase over the next five years.....	4	31	48	15	2
Farmer net income will stay level or continue to increase over the next five years.....	5	36	44	15	1
Land values will continue to climb at double-digit rates .....	9	41	40	8	2

**Table 2. Factors driving land value increases**

	No Influence	Slight Influence	Moderate Influence	Strong Influence	Very Strong Influence
— Percentage —					
High grain prices.....	1	2	13	56	29
Competition between neighboring/local farmers who want to expand their land base .....	1	6	22	50	22
Low returns on other investments make investment in land more attractive .....	1	8	25	47	19
Individual investors purchasing farmland.....	1	13	36	41	10
Increased global demand for food.....	1	10	39	43	7
Greed .....	8	18	21	28	24
Institutional investors purchasing farmland.....	2	17	34	35	13
Ethanol production.....	2	16	38	36	9
Land purchased for hunting or recreational uses.....	11	43	29	14	4

of investments was a strong or very strong influence (table 2). Other investment-related factors were rated somewhat lower on the influence scale: about half of farmers rated the influence of individual investors (51 percent) or institutional investors (48 percent) as strong or very strong.

Most remaining items were rated as strongly influential by half or fewer farmers: greed (52 percent); increased global demand for food (50 percent); and, ethanol production (45 percent) (table 2). The lowest-rated item was purchase of land for hunting or recreational purposes.

**Impacts of increases**

Farmers were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of items that were preceded by the text: “In your opinion, how have the increases in land prices impacted farming?”

Ninety-six percent of farmers agreed that rising land values have driven land rents higher (table 3). Just over 90 percent agreed that increases have made it tougher for the next generation to enter farming. Eighty-two percent agreed that it is more difficult to expand operations, and 70 percent agreed that increases have made it harder to pass farms to the next generation.

Seventy-one percent of survey respondents agreed that rising land prices have led to intensification of farming (table 3). Forty-three percent believed that high land prices have led to “mining” of the soil. Notably, the increases in the value of the land do not appear to result in better land stewardship: just 23 percent of farmers agreed that commitment to soil conservation has increased along with land values; nearly half (49 percent) disagreed.

Two items focused specifically on potential benefits. Fifty-four percent of respondents indicated that non-operator landowners have benefited from increases in land values more than have farmers (table 3). Forty percent of farmers agreed that land value increases have benefitted farmers.

**Rural Issues and Quality of Life**

The Farm Poll routinely asks farmers about quality of life and related issues. Over the three decades of the Farm Poll’s existence, a number of questions have been posed multiple times, which allows us to examine changes in farmer perspectives over time. This year we look back over the Farm Poll’s thirty years to track the importance that Iowa’s farmers place on issues related to farm profitability and persistence,

**Table 3. Perceived impacts of land values on farming**

Increases in land prices have...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	— Percentage —				
driven rents higher .....	0	1	2	35	61
made it harder for the next generation to enter farming .....	1	2	6	39	52
made it difficult to expand farm operations .....	1	5	12	56	26
made it harder to pass farms to the next generation.....	1	9	19	39	31
led to more intensification of farming .....	0	4	25	60	11
benefited non-operator landowners more than farmers .....	1	16	28	44	10
led to mining of the soil .....	4	18	35	33	10
motivated many farmers to sell out.....	2	23	31	39	6
benefited farmers on the whole .....	3	22	35	36	4
led to greater commitment to soil conservation	10	39	28	21	2

soil and water conservation, and general socioeconomic conditions.

**Issues related to farming and conservation**

A number of questions about the profitability and viability of farming have been asked over the years. Concern about the long-term decline in the number of farms in the state was relatively stable over the first 20 years of the survey, with 83, 78, and 84 percent of farmers indicating that it was an “important” or “very important” issue in 1982, 1993, and 2002, respectively (table 4). In 2012, that statistic dropped substantially, to 64 percent. Similarly, concern about the ability of the next generation to enter farming declined slightly, from 89 percent important or very important in 1982 to 82 percent in 2012.

Concern about several market-related issues has also declined over time. “Loss of competitive markets for farm products” declined from an important/very important rating of over 90 percent in 1993 and 2002, to 64 percent in 2012 (table 4). Likewise, “overproduction of agricultural products,” which was rated important or very important by 83 percent of farmers in 1982, was rated

similarly by only 36 percent of participants in 2012. The proportion of farmers who rate “market concentration among large-scale agribusiness” as an important or very important issue has been relatively stable over the last 20 years, ranging from 74 percent in 1993 to 68 percent in 2012.

The importance placed on soil erosion and water pollution as issues has also declined over the years. In 1982, soil erosion was rated as important or very important by 88 percent of farmers, compared to 63 percent in 2012 (table 4). The importance rating of water pollution also declined, from 79 percent important or very important in 1982 to 56 percent in 2012.

**Socioeconomic issues**

In 2012 we asked farmers to rate the importance of several socioeconomic issues, including interest rates, inflation, and unemployment. These items were included in the August 1982 Farm Poll at the tail end of a deep recession. At the time the 1982 survey was mailed, the prime interest rate was over 20 percent, the inflation rate was close to six percent, and unemployment was above 10 percent. By comparison, in February 2012 both

**Table 4. Perspectives on rural issues over time**

		Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
— Percentage —						
Declining number of farms in the state	2012	3	9	24	43	21
	2002	1	2	13	22	62
	1993	2	3	17	21	57
	1982	2	5	11	36	47
Young people not being able to start farming	2012	1	5	12	38	44
	1982	1	3	7	32	57
Loss of competitive markets for farm products	2012	2	11	24	43	21
	2002	1	1	5	17	76
	1993	1	1	9	26	64
Market concentration of large-scale agribusiness	2012	1	7	24	44	24
	1993	2	3	21	31	43
Overproduction of agricultural products	2012	8	23	33	29	7
	1982	2	4	11	36	47
Conversion of farmland to non-farm use	2012	6	18	23	34	20
	1982	4	8	18	34	36
Soil erosion	2012	3	11	23	38	25
	1982	1	3	8	37	51
Water pollution	2012	3	15	26	35	21
	1982	1	5	14	44	35
Inflation	2012	5	16	29	34	16
	1982	1	2	7	31	59
Interest rates	2012	9	20	26	29	17
	1982	1	1	4	24	70
Unemployment	2012	8	22	27	31	13
	1982	2	4	12	36	46
Rural crime	2012	6	22	31	29	12
	1982	2	6	18	46	30
Consolidation of rural services, such as public schools, the court system, hospitals, etc.	2012	3	10	29	44	14
	2002	4	7	28	29	32

the prime rate and the inflation rate were close to 3 percent, and the national unemployment rate was 8.3 percent.

Not surprisingly, farmers were significantly less concerned about interest rates and inflation in 2012 than they were in 1982. In 1982, over 90 percent of farmers rated interest rates and inflation as important or very important (table 4). In 2012, just 50 percent were concerned about inflation and 46 percent expressed concern about interest rates. Although 2012 national unemployment levels were similar to those in 1982, the proportion of farmers who rated it as an important or very important issue in 2012—44 percent—was about half the 82 percent who did so in 1982.

Finally, concern about rural crime has declined, from an important/very important rating of 76 percent in 1982 to 41 percent in 2012 (table 4). Concern about consolidation of rural services has remained steady (around 60 percent important/very important) since 2002, when it was first measured.

### Quality of life

Every two years since 1982, the Farm Poll has asked farmers to evaluate changes in quality of life, defined as “the degree of satisfaction with all aspects of life,” for their families and families in their communities. Given the difficult

national economic situation over the last several years, the 2012 results were of particular interest.

Ninety-one percent of participants reported that quality of life for their families either stayed the same or improved over the last five years (table 5). This represents the highest level ever reported in the history of the Farm Poll. Seventy-seven percent indicated that quality of life among families in their communities had either remained the same or improved, also a Farm Poll high. Farmers were also optimistic about the future: 86 percent predicted that quality of life will stay the same or improve for their families over the next five years; 76 percent believed the same about families in their communities; and, 65 percent predicted that overall economic prospects for Iowa farmers will remain steady or improve over the same time period.

### *Agricultural Information: Sources and Preferred Means of Access*

Information that farmers can use for decision making is available from many sources. In addition, the last decade or so has seen enormous changes in information and communications technology that have multiplied the ways that farmers can access information. The 2012 Farm Poll asked

**Table 5. Quality of life**

	Become Much Worse	Become Somewhat Worse	Remained the Same	Become Somewhat Better	Become Much Better
	— Percentage —				
During the past five years, has the quality of life for families <i>in your community</i> .....	2	21	35	36	6
During the past five years, has the quality of life for <i>your family</i> .....	1	9	37	42	12
In the next five years, will the quality of life for <i>families in your community</i> .....	2	23	53	22	1
In the next five years, will the quality of life for <i>your family</i> .....	1	13	54	29	3
In the next five years, will the <i>overall</i> economic prospects for Iowa farmers .....	3	32	38	25	2

farmers about the sources on which they rely for different kinds of information needed for agricultural decision making. We also asked them to help us understand their preferences regarding the ways and means through which ISU Extension and Outreach provides information and educational programming to support their farming and farm management decisions.

### **Primary sources of information**

Farmers were provided a list of topics covering crop production, nutrient management, pest and disease management, conservation, finances, and marketing, and asked to select the category of information provider that they would “go to first” when seeking information on that topic. The categories were: Fertilizer or agricultural chemical dealer, seed dealer, USDA/NRCS/SWCD service center,<sup>1</sup> private crop consultants, Iowa State University Extension, commodity associations, and “other.”

For the three subtopics under the area of crop production—corn production, soybean production, and seed selection—seed dealers were the first choice for a plurality of farmers, followed by fertilizer or agricultural chemical dealers, and ISU Extension and Outreach (table 6).

Responses for pest and disease management information were more varied. For crop disease, insect, and weed management information, fertilizer and agricultural chemical dealers were selected as the primary source of information by 55, 58, and 69 percent of farmers, respectively (table 6). ISU Extension and Outreach was designated as the top source of such information by 23, 22, and 16 percent of farmers, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup>Nearly all counties in Iowa have a United States Department of Agriculture Service Center that offers conservation assistance to farmers and landowners. Service Centers house staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the IDALS Division of Soil Conservation, local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

As might be expected, fertilizer or agricultural chemical dealers were selected as the preferred provider of information on fertilizer application rates (79 percent of farmers) and nutrient management (63 percent of farmers) (table 6). Nine percent selected ISU Extension and Outreach as first choice for information on fertilizer application rates, and 18 percent designated ISU Extension and Outreach as the primary source for nutrient management information.

USDA/NRCS/SWCD Service Centers were designated as the preferred resource for information for both conservation tillage (45 percent of farmers) and soil and water conservation in general (62 percent of farmers) (table 6). Thirty-two percent of farmers indicated that they would go to ISU Extension and Outreach first for information on conservation tillage, and 24 percent would do the same for soil and water conservation information.

Responses for farm financial management and marketing showed that many farmers did not select any of the listed entities as their primary information source. Most farmers (57 percent) selected “other” as their preferred source of farm financial management information, and 26 percent chose ISU Extension and Outreach (table 6). For marketing, 49 percent selected “other,” 21 percent selected commodity associations, 12 percent selected private crop consultants, and 12 percent chose ISU Extension and Outreach as their preferred information source.

### **Partnerships with stakeholders**

The results reported above show that Iowa farmers rely primarily on agribusinesses, ISU Extension and Outreach, and state agencies for their information needs. These results help to validate ISUEO’s strategic initiatives to increase impact by delivering science-based agricultural information both directly to farmers and through key partner stakeholders who also

**Table 6. Where farmers would go first for information**

	Fertilizer or Ag Chemical Dealer	Seed Dealer	USDA/NRCS/ SWCD Service Center	Private Crop Consultant	Iowa State University Extension	Commodity Association	Other
— Percentage —							
<b>Crop Production</b>							
Corn production.....	28	37	4	7	19	1	4
Soybean production.....	25	40	4	7	19	2	4
Seed selection.....	7	81	1	3	5	0	3
<b>Pest and Disease Management</b>							
Crop disease management..	55	7	3	9	23	1	3
Insect management.....	58	3	3	10	22	0	4
Weed management .....	69	1	2	8	16	0	3
<b>Nutrient Management</b>							
Fertilizer application rates....	79	1	1	5	9	0	3
Nutrient management.....	63	2	5	8	18	1	4
<b>Conservation</b>							
Conservation tillage.....	4	1	45	3	32	1	15
Soil and water conservation	2	1	62	2	24	0	9
<b>Finances and Marketing</b>							
Farm financial management	3	0	4	8	26	2	57
Marketing .....	3	0	3	12	12	21	49

have contact with farmers. Agribusinesses, crop consultants, commodity groups, state agencies, and other agricultural information providers rely heavily on ISU research and extension information as they formulate their technical assistance recommendations for farmers. For example, a recent survey found that more than 80 percent of crop advisers identify ISU as their primary source of information. Through these public and private partnerships, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach helps ensure that agricultural decision support that partners provide to farmers is research-based, current, and widely disseminated.

**Preferred means of accessing information from ISU Extension and Outreach**

As communications technology has changed, so have the ways in which information can be provided to farmers. The 2012 Farm Poll contained a set of questions designed to measure farmers’ preferred means of receiving

different types of information from ISU Extension and Outreach. The same list of agricultural topics covering crop production, nutrient management, pest and disease management, conservation, finances, and marketing from the previous question was provided, and farmers were asked to indicate “which would be the preferred ways for you to receive information and educational programming from Extension.” The delivery methods included traditional forms such as field days and workshops, trainings, and meetings, but also included newer forms such as on-line videos and webcasts, downloaded publications, and applications (“apps”) for smartphones or tablet computers. Farmers were asked to check all that applied.

In general, results indicate that farmers are fairly diverse in their preferences. Traditional, in-person events such as field days and meetings were the most popular means of delivery for



**Table 7. Preferred ways of receiving information and programs from ISU Extension and Outreach**

	Field Days	Workshops, Trainings, Meetings	On-line Videos, Webcasts	Downloaded Publications	"Apps" for a Smartphone or Tablet	Would Probably Not Use Extension
— Percent Checked —						
<b>Crop Production</b>						
Corn production.....	37	29	11	17	3	11
Soybean production.....	37	29	11	17	3	11
Seed selection.....	28	20	9	16	2	18
<b>Pest and Disease Management</b>						
Crop disease management.....	23	36	13	19	3	10
Insect management.....	21	35	13	19	3	10
Weed management.....	26	35	12	20	3	10
<b>Nutrient Management</b>						
Nutrient management.....	20	36	13	18	2	11
Fertilizer application rates.....	21	31	10	19	2	15
<b>Conservation</b>						
Soil and water conservation.....	21	33	13	19	2	11
<b>Finances and Marketing</b>						
Financial management.....	3	28	10	17	2	20
Marketing.....	6	30	12	17	3	19

most types of information. However, substantial numbers of farmers expressed preference for electronic distribution of materials and programming through on-line videos, webcasts, and downloaded publications. Very few, however, selected smartphone or tablet “apps” (table 7).

For information related to crop production, field days were the most popular means of obtaining extension programming, followed by workshops, trainings, and meetings (table 7). That said, about one-quarter of farmers indicated that on-line videos and webcasts or downloaded publications would be preferred avenues of access to ISU Extension and Outreach materials on crop production.

For pest and disease management, farmers again tended to prefer in-person programming (table 7). Workshops, trainings, and meetings were favored over field days for all three subject areas: crop disease, insect, and weed management. About one-third of

farmers chose on-line videos and webcasts or downloaded publications as preferred ways of receiving pest and disease management information.

Preferences for nutrient management and conservation were similar. Workshops, trainings, and meetings were slightly favored over field days (table 7). Again, for all three subject areas under the two topics, slightly over 30 percent of farmers expressed preference for on-line videos and webcasts and downloaded publications.

In the area of farm financial management and marketing, about 30 percent of farmers favored workshops, trainings, and meetings (table 7). Seventeen percent indicated that downloaded publications were the favored form of communication of information.

### *Use of Communications Technology*

As internet and mobile communications technologies become more prevalent media for

**Table 8. Use of communications technology**

	Percent Checked
Cell phone without Internet access.....	75
Computer with high-speed Internet access.....	58
Smartphone (iPhone, Android, Blackberry).....	11
Computer with dial-up Internet access.....	11
Tablet computer (iPad, Kindle, Nook, Galaxy).....	10
Cell phone with Internet access.....	5

communicating with farmers, it is important to understand which technologies farmers are actually using. We provided Farm Poll survey participants with a list of communication technologies and asked them to select the ones they own and/or use regularly.

The most common communications technology used by farmers was a basic cell phone. Seventy-five percent of farmers reported that they own and/or regularly use a cell phone without Internet access (table 8). Fifty-eight percent reported that they have or regularly use a computer with high-speed Internet access. Smartphone use was reported by 11 percent of farmers. Eleven percent had a computer with dial-up Internet access, 10 percent own or use a tablet computer such as an iPad or Kindle, and five percent reported a cell phone with Internet access. Overall, 70 percent of farmers reported at least one technology that enables access to the Internet.

### ***Concern about Resistance in Pests***

Many Iowa farmers plant crops that are genetically modified to facilitate the management of insect and weed pests. A majority of corn planted in Iowa is “Bt” corn

that is engineered to control corn rootworms. Nearly all soybean and most corn planted in Iowa contains genes that confer resistance to the herbicide glyphosate. In recent years, populations of corn rootworms and several types of weeds that are resistant to these pest management tools have been identified in the state.

The 2012 Farm Poll asked farmers to rate their concern about the potential development of widespread insect resistance to Bt and the spread of herbicide-resistant weeds. More than 80 percent of farmers expressed concern that herbicide resistance will become a problem where they farm (table 9). More than 60 percent of farmers agreed that they are concerned about Bt-resistant insects becoming a problem.

### ***Certified Conservation Farmers***

In recent years, there has been discussion about the possible development of a training and certification program focused on helping Iowa farmers to improve their soil and water conservation abilities. Such a program could be modeled on ISU Extension and Outreach’s successful *Pesticide Applicator Training and*

**Table 9. Management-resistant insects and weeds**

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Uncertain	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
	— Percentage —				
I am concerned that herbicide resistant weeds will become a problem in my area.....	1	5	12	49	33
I am concerned that Bt-resistant insects will become a problem in my area.....	2	8	28	45	17

*Certification and Manure Applicator Certification* programs. The 2012 Farm Poll included a series of questions to measure farmers' interest in and perspectives on such a program.

The question set was preceded by a short description of what such a program might consist of, as follows: "Several groups in Iowa are thinking about developing a voluntary program to certify farm operators as *"Certified Conservation Farmers."* Training would include: identifying farmland conservation needs; understanding agencies, programs, and resources available to support conservation; planning and implementation of conservation practices; communicating conservation needs to landowners; and, marketing conservation skills to landowners. Farmers who rent land could promote their conservation farmer certification as an asset that would assure landowners that they would care for their land. Please answer the following questions regarding the program."

In general, Farm Poll participants appeared to be open to the idea of a training and certification program centered on helping farmers to improve their conservation skills.

Sixty-five percent indicated that they would be or might be interested in learning more about such a program (table 10). Fifty-four percent of farmers reported that they would be or might be interested in becoming a certified conservation farmer. Nearly 80 percent selected either "yes" or "maybe" in response to the question, "do you think a Certified Conservation Farmer program would help Iowa farmers to do more conservation?"

About one-third of farmers agreed that landlords would be more likely to rent to a "certified conservation farmer," and that landowners would be more likely to rent to a farmer who was certified over one who was not, while 34 and 48 percent of farmers, respectively, responded "maybe" (table 10). In response to a question about whether ISU Extension and Outreach should start a certified conservation farmer program, 29 percent selected yes, and 43 percent selected maybe. Overall, the results from these questions suggest that there would be substantial demand for such a program if it were developed.

**Table 10. Perspectives on a hypothetical "Certified Conservation Farmer" program**

	Yes	Maybe	No
	— Percentage —		
Would you be interested in learning more about a Certified Conservation Farmer program? .....	30	35	35
Would you be interested in becoming a Certified Conservation Farmer?.....	21	33	46
Do you think a Certified Conservation Farmer program would help Iowa farmers to do more conservation? .....	38	38	24
Do you think landowners would be more likely to rent to a Certified Conservation Farmer over someone who was not certified?..	31	34	34
Do you think landlord(s) would want their tenants to become Certified Conservation Farmers?.....	32	48	20
Do you think Iowa State University Extension should start a Certified Conservation Farmer program?.....	29	43	28

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### Extension and Outreach

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