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The Alabama Farm Poll: Insights from the First Iteration of a Biennial Statewide Farm Survey

Abstract

In early 2025, a team with Alabama Extension and Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute conducted the first iteration of the Alabama Farm Poll, a statewide survey designed to capture agricultural producers' perspectives on farm resilience, management decision-making, and well-being. In this paper, we report key findings from the pilot survey, related to farm operation satisfaction, farmer well-being, and farmer stress. Results show that a majority of respondents reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their quality of life, despite substantial economic pressures. Over half of the producers who responded to the survey reported that the cost of farmland and the cost of farm inputs were "extremely stressful" or "stressful." Negotiations with family members about the farm were the least stressful aspect of farming for respondents. These findings reveal a tension between economic pressures and overall well-being, suggesting that non-economic factors, including social relationships and aspects of lifestyle, play an important role in farmers' quality of life. With the launch of the farm poll model in Alabama, this study contributes context-specific insights from a region that has been underrepresented in survey-based assessments of farmer sentiment. The results offer practical implications for Extension systems and policymakers seeking to address

structural stressors while supporting farmer well-being. We also provide guidance for the development of future statewide farm polls.

Keywords: Alabama agriculture, farmer well-being, farm poll, survey research, quality of life, farm stress

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture and other USDA-produced surveys provide extensive detail on the structure of the U.S. agricultural industry, including production metrics, producer demographics, and information about farm operation finances. However, comparatively less systematic information is available on agricultural producers' perspectives and experiences beyond economic sentiment indicators. While Extension personnel and others working in the agricultural industry may have a strong grasp of producer sentiment through personal interactions and conversations with farmers, these perspectives are rarely collected in a formal and standardized manner. This gap is consequential as information on producer sentiment is crucial for understanding farmer decision-making; agricultural producers make farm management decisions not only in response to objective conditions but also through their own perceptions of risk, opportunity, and well-being.

One longstanding example of a systematic effort to capture farmer perspectives is the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, which has been conducted annually since the 1980s by Iowa State University (Arbuckle, 2024). Other land grant universities and Extension systems have created farmer perspective surveys modeled similarly to the Iowa Poll (e.g., Jackson-Smith et al., 2021), contributing to a growing body of knowledge on farmer sentiment, decision-making, and responses to economic, environmental, and policy conditions. However, these efforts have been concentrated primarily in the Midwest, leaving other regions, particularly the Southeastern United States, comparatively underrepresented in survey-based assessments of farmer perspectives.

To address this gap, a team from Alabama Extension and the Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute created the Alabama Farm Poll, a statewide survey designed to systematically capture agricultural producers' perspectives on farm resilience, management decision-making, and well-being within the context of Alabama's agricultural systems. The pilot survey was launched in early 2025. This article presents key findings from the initial iteration of the Alabama Farm Poll and examines patterns in farm operation satisfaction, farmer well-being, and sources of stress. The study provides context-specific insights into farmer experiences in the Southeastern United States and offers implications for Extension programming, policy discussions, and the development of future statewide farm poll efforts.

Methods

Drawing on a modified tailored survey design method used in the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll and the Ohio Farm Poll, we mailed paper copies of the Alabama Farm Poll to 5,000 randomly selected Alabama farms (Arbuckle, 2024; Dillman et al., 2014; Jackson-Smith et al., 2021). We drew the sample from DTN, a commercial database compiled from USDA Farm Service Agency farm records. Survey recipients could complete the paper survey and return it in a prepaid envelope or scan a QR code to complete the survey online via the Auburn University Qualtrics platform. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The paper copy of the survey was 12 pages long and included questions about agricultural producers' experiences with stress, adaptation, and innovation, as well as their perspectives on well-being and quality of life. The survey also captured information related to farm and farmer resilience, farm management decision-making at the intersection of the farm business, household, and rural community, and perspectives on emerging issues within the industry. We estimate that respondents spent approximately 12-15 minutes completing the online version or paper copy of the survey. Alabama agricultural organizations and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System helped promote the survey rollout through social media and email distribution lists.

In total, we received 576 survey responses. Approximately 250 respondents indicated that they were no longer actively farming, and as a result, did not provide sufficient information for inclusion in the analysis. After excluding these individuals, the final analytical sample included 321 respondents. To assess potential nonresponse bias, we compared early and late respondents using Armstrong and Overton's (1977) extrapolation method and found no statistically significant differences across key variables. We did, however, find that our pilot Alabama Farm poll sample has a higher proportion of male and older respondents with a greater than average years of farming experience and larger farm size when compared to the 2022 Alabama USDA Census of Agriculture estimates.

This paper reports on some of the key outcome variables, including farm operation satisfaction, quality of life, and stress, that we measured using Likert-type scales. Satisfaction measures used a five-point scale ranging from "Very Dissatisfied" to "Very Satisfied," while stress-related items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "Not Stressful" to "Extremely Stressful." We analyzed responses descriptively and presented them as proportions across response categories.

Results

In this section, we present key findings related to farm operation satisfaction, quality of life, and sources of stress among Alabama agricultural producers. Of the 321 respondents, 51.4% identified themselves as primarily cattle and forage producers, 31.6% as row crop, specialty crop, or other crop producers, and 17% as poultry producers. Many producers farmed across these three categories; however, we classified respondents according to the commodity they listed as their primary enterprise. Given variability in economic conditions across commodities and the limited sample size for subgroup analysis, we present results in aggregate.

Figure 1 summarizes respondents' satisfaction with various aspects of their farm operations on a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents reported being very dissatisfied with the cost of farm inputs and the prices received for commodities. In contrast, producers

reported being the most satisfied with their ability to be their own boss and their ability to spend time with their family. Overall, the majority of respondents characterized their farm operation as “satisfied.”

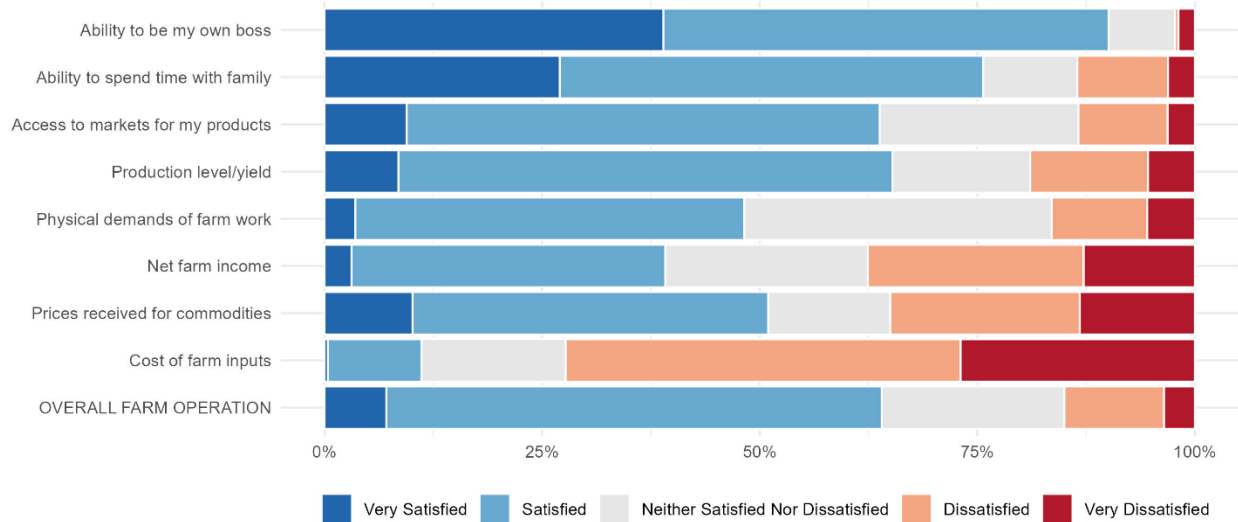


Figure 1. Respondent satisfaction with key aspects of farm operations.

Figures 2 and 3 present respondents’ assessments of personal and family quality of life. Overall quality of life was most commonly rated as “satisfied.” Respondents reported particularly high levels of satisfaction with relationships with spouses or partners and with children, which were frequently rated as “very satisfied.” These findings indicate strong positive evaluations of social and family dimensions of well-being.

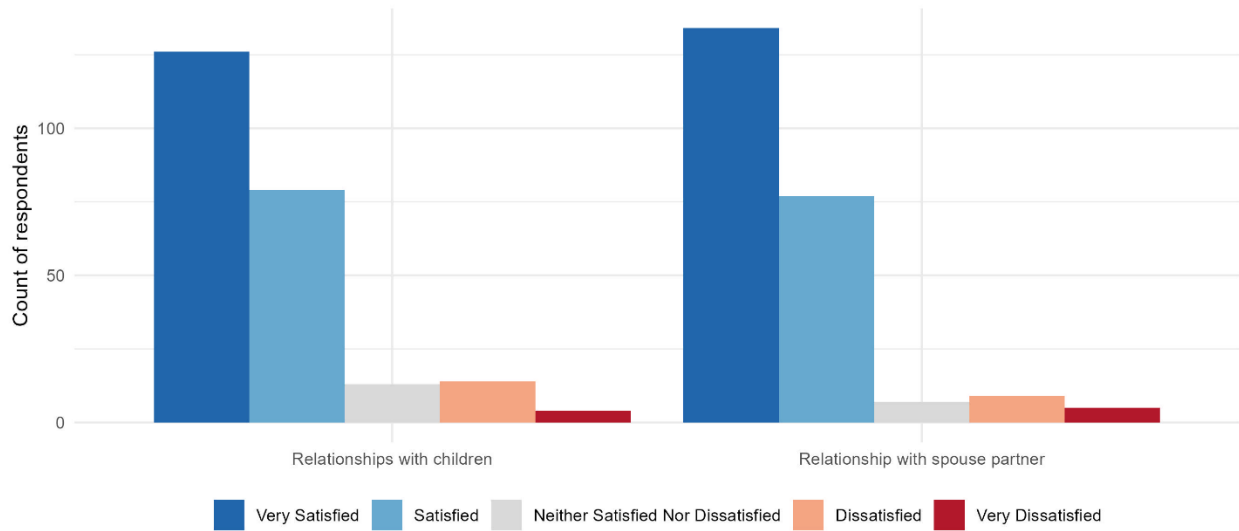


Figure 2. Respondent satisfaction with specific dimensions of personal and family quality of life.

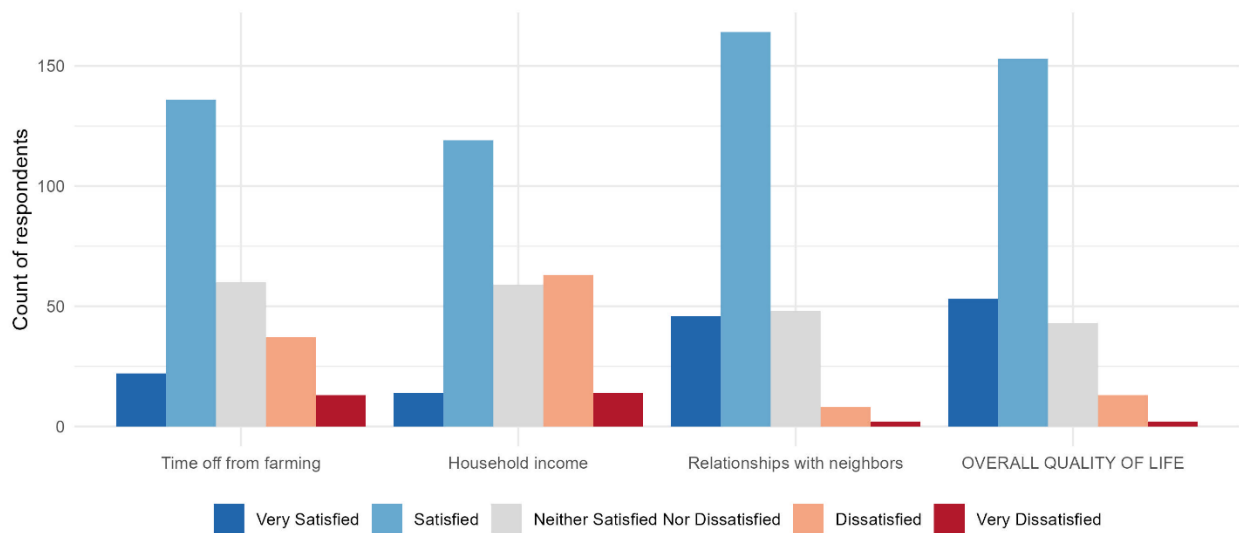


Figure 3. Overall respondent assessment of personal and family quality of life.

Figure 4 presents factors contributing to stress among respondents. Economic factors, including the cost of farm inputs, market prices, and the cost of farmland, were among the most frequently identified sources of stress. Additional stressors included healthcare

costs, concerns about farmland loss, and uncertainty regarding the future of the farm. Notably, the factors associated with the greatest dissatisfaction in farm operations correspond closely with those identified as major contributors to stress.

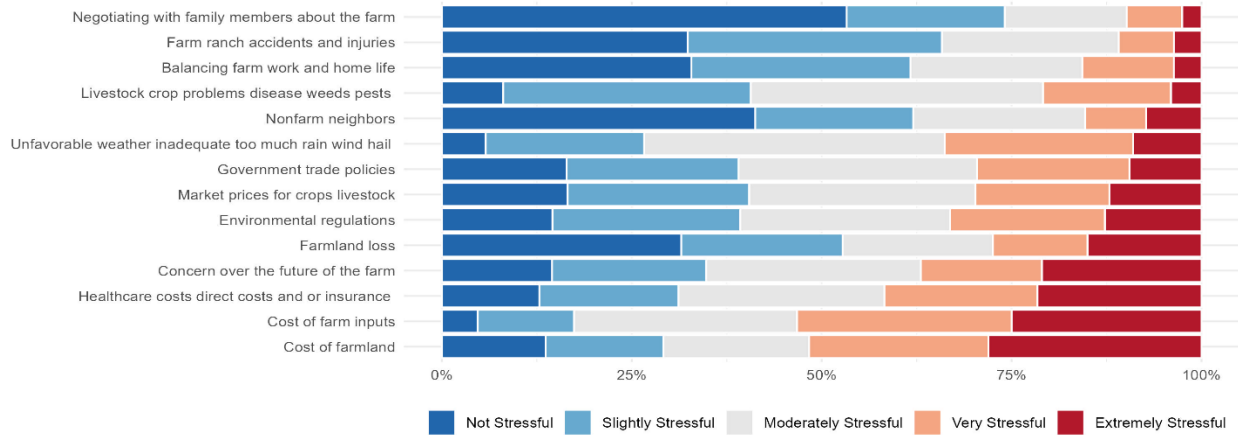


Figure 4. Factors that contribute to stress.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the 2025 Alabama Farm Poll pilot data, agricultural producers report relatively high levels of overall life satisfaction while simultaneously facing substantial economic and structural pressures. This tension between subjective well-being and objective stressors helps to understand how farmers in our sample evaluate their livelihoods and make management decisions.

Across measures of farm operation satisfaction, respondents expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with factors largely outside of their direct control, including the cost of farm inputs and the prices received for commodities. These same factors were also identified as major contributors to farm-related stress. At the same time, respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with aspects of farming tied to autonomy and lifestyle, particularly the ability to be their own boss and to spend time with family. Similarly, measures of personal and family quality of life indicate strong satisfaction with relationships with spouses, children, and neighbors, and a generally positive assessment of overall quality of life.

These findings suggest that farmer well-being is not solely determined by economic conditions. Instead, non-economic dimensions, such as autonomy, identity, and social relationships, appear to play a central role in shaping how farmers evaluate their quality of life, consistent with prior research on farmer decision-making and well-being (Isaac et al., 2024). The coexistence of economic pressure and high subjective well-being may reflect adaptive strategies among farmers, where social and relational resources help buffer the impacts of financial uncertainty and market volatility.

These findings contribute to the body of work on farmer sentiment surveys, most notably the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Polls and the Ohio Farm Polls (Arbuckle, 2025; Jackson-Smith et al., 2021). The Iowa Farm Poll, conducted annually since 1982, is the longest-running survey of its kind and has examined a wide range of issues shaping agricultural systems, including farm management decisions, economic conditions, policy dynamics, technological adoption, and structural changes in rural communities. This sustained effort has produced a rich longitudinal understanding of farmer perspectives and has played a central role in informing Extension programming, research agendas, and policy discussions.

The Alabama Farm Poll builds on this tradition by extending this model of data collection to a new regional context. While the core domains of inquiry are broadly consistent with existing farm poll efforts, the Alabama Farm Poll captures farmer perspectives within the distinct agricultural, social, and economic conditions of the Southeastern United States, an area that has been comparatively underrepresented in systematic, survey-based assessments of farmer sentiment.

The implications of these findings are relevant for Extension systems, policymakers, and farmers. For Extension systems, the results suggest that programming focused primarily on economic or production-related challenges may overlook key dimensions of farmer well-being. While respondents identified input costs, farmland costs, and market conditions as major stressors, they also reported high levels of satisfaction with family relationships and overall quality of life. Expanding Extension efforts to include support

for mental health, stress management, and programming that recognizes the importance of autonomy and work–life balance, may better align with the experiences of producers.

For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of addressing structural pressures that consistently emerge as sources of stress, including rising input costs, farmland access, and healthcare expenses. Although farmers report relatively high levels of overall well-being, these pressures represent persistent constraints that may affect long-term farm viability and succession planning. Policies aimed at reducing financial volatility and improving access to critical resources could help alleviate some of the most significant stressors identified in this study.

For farmers themselves, the results highlight that key stressors, particularly input costs, farmland costs, and market conditions, are widely shared across the agricultural community. At the same time, respondents report strong satisfaction with family relationships and overall quality of life. Recognizing this combination of economic pressure and social support may help normalize discussions around farm stress and support more proactive engagement with peer networks, Extension programming, and mental health resources.

Finally, this study offers important insights for the design and implementation of statewide farm polls. Compared to response rates reported for the Iowa (39%) and Ohio (41%) Farm Polls (Arbuckle, 2025; Jackson-Smith et al., 2021), the Alabama Farm Poll pilot achieved a lower response rate (11.5%). For this reason, next iterations of the Farm Poll will include revisions to survey materials and communication strategies, such as displaying the QR code and clearly stating the purpose and value of the poll to potential responders.

For any individuals considering conducting a statewide mailed survey, we encourage building a significant period into the project timeline for survey development and testing, IRB review and approval, print proof approval, and collaboration with survey launch partners on the rollout promotion. Based on this pilot, we estimate it will take 6 months

or more to prepare a new statewide mailed survey, particularly when planning to collaborate with stakeholders and use survey distribution centers.

We recognize that the 2025 Alabama Farm Poll provides data points for a single point in time. We foresee, though, that the strength of the planned future iterations of the poll lies in our ability to examine how variables such as farm satisfaction and quality of life vary over time. Hence, we look forward to repeating the survey biennially to provide insights for Extension programming, agricultural stakeholders, and key decision-makers to use in conjunction with existing economic, demographic, and agricultural production data.

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