

Kelli Russell, Gracen Bridges, and Mykel Taylor
kjr0041@auburn.edu; gmb0046@auburn.edu; mrt0055@auburn.edu
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University

PURPOSE AND GOALS

The aim of this project is to further understand middle-aged (35-50 years old) farmers' perceptions of farm stress and the resources that they use to navigate stress. The goal of this research is to inform future Extension applied research and programming efforts to further farm(er) resiliency.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted 75 semi-structured, in-person interviews with 96 middle-aged farmers across four states (Alabama, Kansas, Montana, and North Carolina). Participants were recruited through commodity organizations and snowball sampling.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded by hand, and analyzed in MaxQDA 26.

We amassed a significant amount of data: over 4,750 minutes of interviews and over 2,100 pages of transcription.

SAMPLE

Our sample included producers of the following commodities:

- Livestock and dairy (47)
- Row crops and grains (44)
- Oilseeds and pulse crops (8)
- Forages (19)
- Specialty crops (21)

Many producers operated across multiple commodity categories and are listed more than once above.

Producers in the sample farmed anywhere from less than 100 acres (specialty crop) to 60,000+ acres (livestock).

KEY FINDINGS

We found that middle-aged producers had three key areas of stress, related to:

1. **Unpredictable events**
 - Weather changes, natural disasters, crop failures, herd problems, etc.
2. **Farm management choices**
 - Worry about financial viability
3. **Concern over farm succession**
 - Apprehension about the passing on of the farm operation

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

- Middle-aged farmers are often not the focus of applied research - it is usually new/beginning or aging-out farmers. Middle-aged farmers' major stressors are also layered on their life experiences at a critical (and stressful) stage of life when they are the "sandwich generation" - oftentimes caring for both young children at home and the older generation.
- Our study revealed that middle-aged farmers are stressed by the expected factors that are stressors across age groups (unpredictable events and financial viability), but also, surprisingly, farm succession.
- Middle-aged farmers argued that farm succession planning resources are often *not* directed to their age group/stage of farming. Hence, there are few resources to help them navigate the process, either as heirs/successors or as owners/benefactors.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Future Extension programming should address farm succession from multiple vantage points, including for the mid-career producer planning their own future exit, and for the mid-career producer who will be an heir. Additionally, programming targeted for middle-aged producers should account for the high time demands at this stage of life and how that stress impacts their ability to navigate other key stressors, such as unpredictable events and farm management choices related to financial viability.