Maryland
Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary

Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Kevin M. Atticks, Secretary
Steven A. Connelly, Deputy Secretary

Maryland Young Farmers Advisory Board

Agriculture | *Maryland's Leading Industry*
mda.maryland.gov

The Wayne A. Cawley, Jr. Building
50 Harry S Truman Parkway
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

410-841-5882 Baltimore/Washington
410-841-5914 Fax

2025 Maryland Young Farmers Survey Analysis

Published September 19th, 2025

Maryland
Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary

Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Kevin M. Atticks, Secretary
Steven A. Connelly, Deputy Secretary

Maryland Young Farmers Advisory Board

Agriculture | Maryland's Leading Industry
mda.maryland.gov
The Wayne A. Cawley, Jr. Building
50 Harry S Truman Parkway
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

410-841-5882 Baltimore/Washington
410-841-5914 Fax

2025 Maryland Young Farmers Survey

September 19th, 2025

Executive Summary:

The 2025 Maryland Young Farmer Survey provides a comprehensive look into the experiences, challenges, and ambitions of the next generation of agriculturalists across the state. Young farmers are deeply committed to their craft, with most citing a strong passion for agriculture and personal investment. However, the sector is hindered by systemic obstacles such as land access, limited capital, and reliance on off-farm income. While technological practices are beginning to take root, adoption is still uneven. There is a clear appetite for growth and innovation, but sustained success will depend on targeted support from state programs, improved access to grants and financing, and better public engagement. Strategic investments today will ensure a resilient, thriving future for Maryland agriculture.

Demographics, Background, Education, and Trust:

A New Generation is Entering Agriculture with Diverse Backgrounds:

While a majority (62.66%) of young farmers grew up on a farm, a significant 20% are first-generation farmers. This indicates a shift from solely relying on traditional generational succession. While a substantial portion (30%) still comes from families with over 100 years of farming history, the rise of first-generation farmers highlights a broader appeal of agriculture beyond inherited family operations. A total of 534 respondents participated in the survey, representing a wide spectrum of roles in agriculture; farmers (80.45%), agribusiness professionals, educators, and service providers. Gender split is nearly equal (49% male, 48% female), and the population is predominantly white (90.7%).

High Levels of Operational Responsibility and Education, Yet Practical Experience is Key:

Nearly 54% of young farmers identify as owners, partners, or managers, demonstrating a strong commitment to and direct involvement in the operational aspects of their farms. Their educational attainment is high, with over 53% holding an associate's degree or higher, and 54% taking formal classes. However, practical, hands-on experience remains paramount: the largest sources of agricultural experience come from family (68%) and other farmers (67%), along with paid employment (44%) and volunteering (27%). Structured apprenticeship programs, while valuable, are currently utilized by a smaller proportion (12%).

Strong Reliance on Peer Networks and Independent Research for Information:

Young farmers overwhelmingly prioritize information and guidance from their community and other farmers (80%), followed closely by independent research on the internet (77%). While traditional agricultural organizations like the Maryland Department of Agriculture and University of Maryland Extension are trusted, they are referenced by a smaller percentage (45-50%). This suggests a preference for practical, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and self-directed learning in addition to formal sources.

Off-Farm Income is a Critical Component of Financial Sustainability:

A striking conclusion is the heavy reliance on off-farm income, with over 70% of young farmers depending on it. On-farm income only accounts for approximately 45% of their total net household income. Furthermore, 40% of those with off-farm income work in non-agriculture-related jobs, often for insurance benefits and supplemental income. This indicates that for many young farmers, farming is not yet a sole source of livelihood, and off-farm employment is a necessary strategy for financial stability and accessing essential benefits.

Organizational Affiliation is Present but with Room for Growth:

While nearly half (49%) of young farmers are members of the Maryland Farm Bureau, and many also participate in youth organizations like 4-H (38%) and FFA (21%), a notable 22%

are unaffiliated with any agricultural organization. This suggests that while established groups play a role, there's an opportunity to engage a significant portion of young farmers who may not yet be connected to formal agricultural networks.

In summary, the survey results portray young farmers as a highly educated and responsible group, embracing diverse paths into agriculture. While they value formal education, practical experience and peer networks are their primary sources of knowledge. Critically, off-farm income is a vital financial lifeline for most, highlighting the economic challenges and the need for support that acknowledges this reality. There's also potential to further engage a segment of young farmers not currently affiliated with agricultural organizations.

Passion, Production, Presence and Planning:

Passion and Purpose Drive Their Engagement, Despite Economic Realities:

The overwhelming majority of young farmers are driven by a "passion for agriculture" (89.37%). While land inheritance (17.46%) and environmental preservation (19.92%) also play a role, the primary motivation is intrinsic. This passion is crucial, as it sustains them through the economic challenges; over 70% rely on off-farm income, and on-farm income averages only 45% of their total household net income. This suggests that for many, farming is a lifestyle choice and a labor of love, a desire to produce food and promote environmental sustainability in their community.

A Shifting Landscape of Production and Entry:

While traditional products like livestock (49.2%), field crops (47.2%), and hay/straw (37.4%) remain common, there's encouraging growth in agribusiness, livestock, equine, and forestry sectors. Conversely, there's a concerning decline in vegetable, organic, poultry, nursery, and greenhouse producers. This indicates a dynamic agricultural landscape where young farmers are adapting to market demands and perhaps finding niches that are more financially viable or align with their interests. The 20% who are first-generation farmers, despite the majority growing up on a farm, further emphasizes this evolving entry dynamic.

Eagerness to Innovate, but with Caution and a Need for Support:

Young farmers are actively engaged in adopting new technologies. Nearly half (48%) have incorporated some form of precision agriculture, and a significant portion are "actively looking for ways to incorporate AI" and automation. However, current AI (artificial intelligence) adoption is low (9.7%), and a notable segment remains opposed to the concept. This suggests an openness to technological advancement but also a need for more understanding, accessible implementation strategies, and perhaps demonstration of clear benefits. The low concern about cybersecurity (47.16% not concerned) despite the increasing integration of technology highlights a potential future vulnerability and a need for greater education in this area.

Strong Emphasis on Direct-to-Consumer Marketing and Digital Presence:

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales are the most common marketing channel (47%), indicating a desire for closer relationships with consumers and potentially better profit margins. While traditional channels like farm stands and farmers' markets are utilized, there are recognized opportunities for expansion into restaurant sales, value-added products, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs). 94.3% of young farmers leverage social media, primarily Facebook and Instagram, for education and branding, and they recognize its power to connect with the public and advocate for agriculture. However, many are not posting consistently (only 37.8% weekly or more), suggesting a need for guidance on effective digital marketing strategies.

Optimistic Outlook and Strong Desire for Growth and Diversification:

Young farmers are overwhelmingly "excited about the future of agriculture" and are highly motivated to expand their businesses. Their plans include purchasing equipment (54.7%), increasing acreage (54.4%), acquiring farmland (42.5%), and diversifying operations (35.2%). Very few (less than 2%) anticipate leaving farming or decreasing their acreage. Their interest in pilot carbon credit programs (26.8% interested) suggests an openness to new revenue streams that align with environmental stewardship. This forward-looking perspective, coupled with their desire for more grants, land preservation support, and reduced regulatory burdens, indicates a strong commitment to making their agribusinesses successful and sustainable in Maryland.

Comparison and Contrast of Young Farmer Challenges (2015 vs. 2025)

Similarities (Persistent Challenges):

- **Access to Land:** This remains the absolute top challenge, even increasing in concern (66.8% in 2015 to 77.2% in 2025). The desire to expand and increase acreage underscores the ongoing difficulty in securing affordable and available land, whether through ownership, family land, renting, or shared leases.
- **Making Enough Income to Live:** Consistently a major hurdle, with very similar percentages (73.7% in 2015 vs. 76.1% in 2025). The reliance on off-farm income (over 70% in 2025) highlights the struggle for financial self-sufficiency from farming alone.
- **Lack of Capital:** Very consistent concern (53.47% in 2015 vs. 53.9% in 2025), indicating that having sufficient funds for investments, operations, and growth remains a significant barrier.
- **Access to Credit/Finance:** Also a persistent challenge (50.58% in 2015 vs. 54.4% in 2025). This is closely tied to the lack of capital, as farmers need access to loans to fund their operations and expansions.
- **Government Regulation:** While the percentage has slightly decreased (54% in 2015 vs. 42.09% in 2025), it remains a significant obstacle, ranking high on both lists. This

suggests that while there might be some perceived improvements or a shift in focus, regulatory burdens continue to impact farmers.

Differences (Evolving Challenges & New Concerns):

- **Emergence of "Cost of Entry" as a Top 5 Challenge (2025):** In 2025, "Cost of entry" (53.6%) specifically appears as a distinct high-ranking challenge, not explicitly detailed in the 2015 list (though implied by "lack of capital" and "access to credit"). This suggests a growing recognition of the significant upfront investment required for new farmers, encompassing land, equipment, and initial operating costs.
- **Increased Visibility of Health Care Costs (2025):** "Cost and Access to Health Care" is a new entry in the top 10 for 2025 (34.32%). This reflects a growing recognition of the financial strain and personal challenge that healthcare expenses pose to young farmers, many of whom rely on off-farm jobs for benefits.
- **Labor Challenges (2025):** "Labor" (30.29%) appears as a distinct challenge in 2025. This indicates a growing difficulty in finding and retaining sufficient agricultural labor, which could be due to an aging farm workforce, competition for workers, or other economic factors.
- **Zoning Issues (2025):** "Zoning Issues" (24.93%) is another new entry in 2025. This highlights increasing conflicts or complexities related to land use planning, especially as agricultural land faces pressure from development and non-farming applications.
- **Specific Wildlife Damage (2025):** While not in the top 10 list itself, the data explicitly mentions that **60% of respondents have been affected by deer damage, resulting in approximately 23% of total annual crop loss to deer**. This is a significant and quantifiable new concern that wasn't highlighted in the top 2015 obstacles, suggesting an increasing impact of wildlife on farm profitability.
- **Broadening of "Education and Training" (2025):** While education and training were likely always important, their inclusion alongside "business planning" and "neighbors" in the lower ranks of 2025 suggests a more nuanced understanding of the informational and community support needs beyond just technical farming skills.

Overall Trends:

- **Intensification of Core Financial and Land Challenges:** The top five challenges in both years are heavily dominated by financial and land access issues. These problems appear to have become even more acute by 2025, with higher percentages of young farmers reporting them. Public financial support programs such as the Maryland Agriculture and Resource Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) and USDA’s Farm Service Agency, as well as private financing institutions such as Farm Credit, are consistently cited in survey results as programs that have been the most influential in the success of agricultural businesses. Over 43% of respondents who identified programs that were beneficial to young farmer success named MARBIDCO programs (Next-Gen land acquisition program, cold storage grants, matching grants, etc.), emphasizing the successes of this program over time.

- **Increasing Complexity of the Farming Environment:** The addition of concerns like healthcare, labor, zoning, and specific wildlife damage in 2025 indicates that the challenges facing young farmers are becoming more diverse and intricate, extending beyond purely financial and land-related hurdles.
- **Growing External Pressures:** The prominence of government regulation, zoning issues, and specific environmental concerns like deer damage suggests increasing external pressures and complexities that farmers must navigate.

5 Strategic Opportunities to Protect and Grow Maryland's Agriculture Industry

To effectively protect and grow Maryland's vital agriculture industry, a strategic approach focusing on several interconnected areas is crucial. Based on farmer feedback, here are five key opportunities:

1. **Enhance Financial Accessibility and Support for Farmers**
   a. Maryland should streamline and expand financial programs to ensure the economic viability of its farms, especially for young and beginning farmers. This means not only increasing funding for grants and low-interest loans but also making these programs easier to access with less restrictive processes and quicker turnaround times. Focus on targeted aid for land acquisition, start-up costs, essential equipment, and infrastructure (like deer fencing). Addressing economic viability through improved commodity prices and support for diversified operations will help farmers make a living wage and invest in their future.
2. **Safeguard Farmland and Mitigate Development Pressures**
   a. Protecting Maryland's agricultural land from conversion is paramount. This requires stronger policies and active measures to preserve farmland, combating the increasing pressure from housing developments, data centers, and renewable energy projects. Prioritize initiatives that make farmland affordable for young farmers, including facilitating the purchase of already preserved land. Tighter zoning restrictions on agricultural land and long-term lease agreements on state-owned land can further ensure that farming remains a viable and growing industry in the state.
3. **Simplify Regulatory Framework and Reduce Administrative Burden**
   a. Farmers are asking for sensible and less burdensome regulations that reflect the realities of agricultural practices in Maryland. This involves reviewing and streamlining existing policies, such as those related to nutrient management and on-farm processing, to remove unnecessary administrative hurdles. By reducing red tape and fostering a more flexible regulatory environment, Maryland can empower farmers to innovate, adapt, and operate more efficiently, rather than being bogged down by excessive paperwork.

4. **Cultivate Public Understanding and Advocate for Agriculture**
    a. A significant opportunity lies in proactively educating the public and promoting a positive image of agriculture. Maryland should invest in comprehensive educational programs, from K-12 schools to broader public outreach campaigns, to counter misinformation and highlight the essential role farmers play in food production and environmental stewardship. Showcasing farmers' conservation efforts, diversifying the representation of Maryland farmers, and fostering direct farmer-consumer connections through local markets and agritourism will build greater appreciation and support for the industry.
5. **Strengthen Farmer Engagement and Responsive Government Support**
    a. Building a more supportive relationship between farmers and the government requires active listening and tailored assistance. Maryland needs to enhance communication channels, ensuring that farmers' voices are heard in policy development. This means providing responsive support, recognizing regional differences in farming landscapes, and offering flexible programs that address specific challenges like wildlife crop damage or access to processing facilities. Fostering strong community networks and mentorship programs among farmers will also create a more resilient and collaborative agricultural sector.