

## **2015 Maryland Young Farmers Survey Summary**

### *Maryland Young Farmers Advisory Board*

As a result of the 2015 Young Farmers Survey, the Maryland Young Farmers Advisory Board was able to draw several strong conclusions about the challenges Maryland young farmers are facing. This summary will highlight the key findings and discuss what it means for Maryland agriculture as a whole. There were 466 young farmers (under 40) sampled for the survey. The majority of the survey participants reside in Maryland, with every county represented, with a few respondents from Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

- ❖ The majority of the respondents were between the ages 23-39 (69%), 42% have at least a bachelor's degree, and an additional 17% had attained higher levels of education (i.e. Master's, Professional, and Doctorate).

In the opening questions of the survey, the results shows that close to 30% of young farmers are first generation farmers and over half have been farming for less than 10 years. Question three also shows that over half of young farmers have less than 10 years of farming experience. Additionally, we can conclude from the responses below regarding a young farmers' source of information, that the most common outlet of education is "other farmers". If existing farmers tend to be the traditional source of education and close to 30% of young and new farmers are coming from backgrounds without this intrinsic knowledge, it presents a unique information gap. The Young Farmers Board sees this as a major need for education about farming practices among the starting population. This need for education presents a unique opportunity to institute the best farm management practices available for new agricultural operations coming online. This could have significant effects regarding cost reduction, production efficiency, and environmental restoration.

- ❖ From those surveyed, 4% hope to begin farming in the next 5 years, 35% have been farming for less than 5 years, 24% have been farming from 5-10 years, and 23% have been farming 11-25 years. Additionally, 7% have no experience in farming, 27% have 1-5 years of experience, 22% have 6-10 years of experience, and 44% have more than 10 years of farming experience.
- ❖ We also found that 28% are first generation farmers, 10% are second generation farmers, 19% are third generation farmers, and 26% are fourth generation farmers.
- ❖ The top three ways young farmers identified as having gained farm experience were through other farmers (67%), a family farm (59%), and educational classes (54%). They also identified the internet (82%), other farmers (81%), and the University of Maryland Extension (55%) as their top sources for getting information regarding farming.
- ❖ *Young farmers also tend to belong to more traditional agricultural organizations over the newer* with 42% belonging to the Maryland Farm Bureau, 27% belonging to Maryland 4-H, 18% with Future Harvest, and 13% with Maryland FFA. 26% also identified as not belonging to an agricultural organization.

A common statistic thrown around in the agricultural industry is that the average age of the American farmer is 58 years old. This number elicits different thoughts and conclusions about the industry but the most common is that young farmers need to be brought into the fold. From the young farmers' survey, we see that the younger generations are motivated to begin or continue farming because of their "interest/passion in farming". This shows a unique draw agriculture has over other industries. On the other side of the issue, one of the least popular drivers for getting into farming was "money". This infers agriculture is having a tough time competing as an income driven career. Furthermore, responses regarding off-farm income show some stark conclusions as well. About one-third of young farmers receive less than 5% of their income from farming and over 60% of our respondents are depending on off-farm income to continue their farming ventures. This continues to drive the narrative that farming is not seen as a reliable and profitable source of income.

- ❖ An overwhelming 87% of young farmers said that they were motivated to begin/continue farming because of their "interest/passion in farming". The second to last response was "money" which only 6% of people said was the reason they got into farming.
- ❖ There is an interesting gap between percentages of total personal income with about one third (33%) earning 100% of their personal income from farming and another one-third (30%) earning less than 5% of their personal income from agriculture. Similarly, 19% of young farmers said that 100% of their household income comes from agriculture and 31% said less than 5% of their household income comes from farming. In the next question, 63% said yes, that they depended on off farm income to continue farming, with the remaining 37% answering no. Also, of those relying on off farm jobs to continue farming, 43% have off farm jobs not related to agriculture.
- ❖ The top five obstacles facing young farmers were identified as: bringing in enough on-farm income to live off of (73%), finding available land for rent or purchase (67%), burdensome government regulation (54%), lack of capital to invest (53%), and a lack of access to credit and finance (51%).

Access to land is a major obstacle that young farmers are constantly facing. It is the single most important and expensive capital input for an agricultural operation. Many times, financing and access to land lots large enough for an effective operation seem to be working against young farmers. Even access to land leases for agriculture are difficult to come by, and state and federal programs to help with the access to land sometimes seems ineffective as well. Our survey responses show that less than half of young farmers own the land they farm and less than one-third cash rent.

- ❖ In accessing land, 49% of young farmers say they own the land they farm, 38% say they farm land owned by a family member, and 31% cash rent land.
- ❖ Over half of young farmers, 56%, identified as living on the property that they farm. While 32% live off farm but within the community, and 12% are outside of the community. In the same vein, of those that identified as growing up on a farm, 38% are still farming on that land and 20% are farming another tract. The remaining 42% identified as not having grown up on a farm.

Today's young farmers are creative and versatile in the ways they are marketing their products. With a new generation come new technologies and ideas. The local food movement and success of farmers markets has helped young farmers distribute and market their products to consumers. Additionally, social media is playing a major role helping disseminate information and drive agro-tourism. The Young Farmers Board sees marketing as one of the most integral aspects of a young farmer's career. Successful marketing creates a desire for the products and it is the demand for those products that will keep a viable market intact.

- ❖ The top three products produced by Maryland's young farmers are field crops (47%), livestock (42%), and vegetables (48%).
- ❖ Young farmers are marketing their products in a variety of ways with the top responses being: farmers markets (33%), wholesale markets (28%), and other (28%). The most common responses in the "other" category were: word of mouth, social media/internet/website, and going through a co-op.
- ❖ Young farmers are also utilizing social media to their advantage with 19% saying they use social media daily, 27% using it weekly, and 15% using it monthly. 38% of respondents said they do not use any form of social media.
- ❖ The most popular form of social media seems to be Facebook (59%). The next two most popular among young farmers are Instagram (19%) and writing a blog (14%).

The Young Farmers Advisory Board agrees with the findings of our survey as it relates to identified challenges and recommendations for improvement.

- ❖ When asked what programs MDA should make available to assist young farmers the top answers were: financial help for land acquisition and business start up, greater access and connection to farm knowledge and agriculture education, help marketing products, and better small business operating resources.

Despite the challenges, young farmers continue to be ambitious in their pursuits. They are moving forward to purchase more farmland and increase the number of acres farmed within the next five years. Young farmers also tend to have a positive outlook on the public's perception of farmers and agriculture. This ambition and positive outlook for the future could be a result of the highly educated generation currently looking toward agriculture as a career. Despite public perception, 42% of young farmers have an education level of at least a bachelor's degree.

- ❖ When asked what their plans were within the next five years, over half (52%) of young farmers said that they plan to purchase farmland. Additionally, 62% of young farmers said they plan to increase the number of acres they farm within the next five years.
- ❖ 49% of young farmers believe that the average Maryland citizen perceives farmers in a positive light. 33% believe they view farmers in a negative light. Conversely, 42% of young farmers believe the average Maryland citizen views agriculture negatively. 39% believe the average citizen sees agriculture in a positive light.

- ❖ When asked what young farmers would say if given the opportunity to speak with a legislator the most common answers and themes were: deregulate the industry, preserve more lands for farming, expand agricultural programs for youth (ag education), help young and beginning farmers access financing, and expand the right to farm laws.

In conclusion, the Young Farmers Survey lends insight to the obstacles of a new generation entering agriculture. As the Young Farmers Advisory Board we will continue to support this new generation and advocate on their behalf for change that is most beneficial to them. The primary focus areas of this advocacy are access to land, credit, education, and markets that provide a sustainable outlet for products.

*(The statistics listed here have been rounded. For exact numbers, please consult the 2015 Maryland Young Farmers Survey)*

*NOTE: A full copy of the Maryland Young Farmer Survey results can be found on the Maryland Department of Agriculture webpage at: [http://mda.maryland.gov/about\\_mda/pages/young-farmers.aspx](http://mda.maryland.gov/about_mda/pages/young-farmers.aspx)*