

Why Do They Quit?

SARE PROJECT GNC15-208

Andrea Rissing

Identifying Key Determinants of Beginning Farmers' Decisions

Project Background

Objective: To understand why some beginning farmers, who overcome initial barriers to entering agriculture, decide to stop farming within their first five years. The project focused on beginning farmers running small-scale, diversified farms targeting direct markets across Iowa.

Methods: To capture the complexities of people's decision making, I used a comparative, qualitative research methodology. As part of my doctoral research, I conducted participant observation with 51 beginning farmers across Iowa between 2015 and 2016. I recorded semi-structured interviews with 44 beginning farmers and 14 former farmers. After transcribing and analyzing interviews, I determined the main reason each former farmer decided to stop farming (Fig 1). Of course, each story has multiple, often contradictory, elements at play.

Discussion: I examined any possible relationship between farm profitability and farm longevity. Did only farmers showing a profit stay in agriculture? Did all unprofitable beginning farmers go out of business? Of the 12 former farmers whose owners Rissing interviewed, four were not profitable, one was breaking even, and seven had been running profitable operations.

Beginning farmers running profitable operations left farming due to burnout, personal relationship stress, and dissatisfaction with agrarian lifestyles. Examples include inability to establish effective communication or a unified farm vision with parents, divorce, and feeling as if running the farm placed too much stress on one's marriage. When discussing financial strain and burn out, farmers pointed to physical exhaustion from working long summer hours, inability to afford employees, and no longer feeling called to annual production after trying it for several seasons.

I also interviewed many beginning farmers who were barely, if that, breaking even, and still more who were not yet paying themselves a fair wage, but who were still farming. Without sufficient income to pay themselves, many of these farmers maintained off-farm jobs. Some farmers made significant lifestyle adjustments to reduce their living costs. Partners or family members supported others.

Summary of Findings

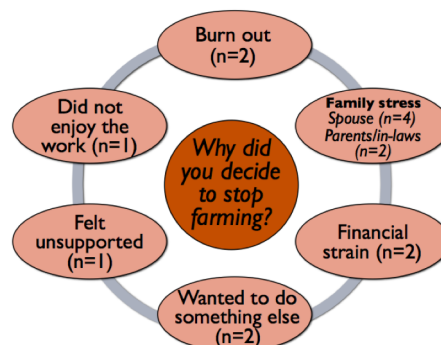


Fig 1. Although some people reported financial stress as the primary reason they had decided to stop farming, strained family relationships were the most commonly reported.

Two stories: In their own words

Dan and Clara* loved the buzz of running a small farm together. They regularly sold out at farmers markets and could not keep up with the orders pouring in from grocery stores and co-ops. They were profitable and estimated they had paid themselves a combined salary in the high \$30,000 range by their third, and final, year farming. But when I interviewed them, Clara told me:

"Our marriage got in trouble. We were just working so hard and we lost touch with the joy.... we started to realize we were growing apart, and we sat down and said this is not worth it. I am committed to the marriage first, any business endeavor second."

* All names are pseudonyms



For five years, Rose* raised broilers and hogs. She direct-marketed in her community and sold to Niman Ranch, covering her costs and netting a couple thousand dollars annually. She loved working with animals, but while her husband supported her interest, he did not share it. After they had children, time got tighter and something had to give.

"If you have a real dream and passion for farming, you want to make sure your partner is on board because if they're not, it's going to be much more difficult. I still would have married who I did, but I think because he doesn't share that passion, that is probably part of the reason why I'm not farming today."