



Small and Minority Farmers: A Unique Perspective on Making Farming a Gratifying Occupation

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Smallholders and minority farmers have shown remarkable resilience in the face of challenges such as land degradation, biodiversity loss, and limited access to resources. They supply fresh, nutritious food to their local and regional communities, preserve agroecosystems, and promote sustainable agriculture. Despite the common perception that small family farms are unproductive, inefficient, and have high production costs per unit of output, the literature shows that they are much more productive and efficient than large farms when yield acreage rather than total output is considered. The inverse relationship between farm size and output can be attributed to smallholder farmers' efficient use of limited production resources, such as land, water, manure, capital, labor, and biodiversity. A separate case study of smallholder and ethnic minority farmers in Maryland in 2021 revealed that approximately 50 different specialty crops were cultivated in an average of 0.33 acres of urban gardens.

Small farms with gross farm income of less than \$250,000, which constitute around 90% of the total number of farms in the U.S., face numerous challenges. Nevertheless, these farms should not be underestimated, as they play a crucial role in food and nutritional security while strengthening the rural economy, contributing approximately 21.5% to the total U.S. farm production. The small farms that remain operational are at a crossroads of survival due to limited resources, socioeconomic and demographic constraints, traditional practices, inability to afford production technology, and marketing limitations. The reluctance of 'Generation Z' to enter the agricultural vocation adds to these challenges. Similarly, the trend in agriculture indicates that "the big farms are getting bigger, and the small farms are going out." In contrast, large farms benefit from economies of scale, allowing them to produce more at a lower cost per unit as the production capacity continues to grow due to ongoing consolidation. In contrast, small-scale farms' inability to afford production technology and limited access to marketing often force them to leave farming operations. The decline of Black farmers from 13% in 1900 to 1.4% in 2017 confirms the real situation of small farms. Undoubtedly, such a decline in small farms leads to job losses and a shrinking economic base in rural communities.

Understanding farmers' current needs compared to the services they are receiving from the Cooperative Extension is necessary for mitigating the decline in small farms and supporting the sustainability of existing ones. The objective of the study was to identify the potential role of extension to help small and minority farmers to develop farming as a gratifying occupation. The University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) Extension conducted a 'Farmers' Needs Assessment in Agriculture' (FNAA) in 2022. The study administered a pre-tested semi-structured questionnaire to 500

clientele through an online link (shared through email), postal mail, and in-person interviews. Descriptive analysis was done using Excel and SPSS for a total of 124 completed surveys received after two consecutive reminders within one month of the survey launch. Farmers' responses regarding their opinion of farming as a gratifying occupation were grouped into three tiers.

The respondents to the questionnaire included socially disadvantaged farmers (30%), beginning farmers and ranchers (16%), veteran farmers (11%), and limited resource farmers (7%). The results revealed a comprehensive compilation of opinions on making farming a gratifying occupation. Of the total gratifying factors, Tier 1 consisted of 6% of responses (Fig. 1), Tier 2 represented 2% to 5% of responses (Table 1), and Tier 3 made up only 1% of the total number of farmers' responses. Of the seven suggestions clustered in Tier 1, the most demanded by farmers was interest-free loans (22%), followed by assured marketing of their produce (16%). Lifetime subsidized credit to procure farm machinery/equipment was mentioned by 15% of farmers, followed by free schooling at agricultural colleges for their children (8%), free access to capacity-building activities (7%), extra credit for being a farmer (6%), and free access to government or public land for farming (6%).

The Tier 2 cluster included nine suggestions to make farming a gratifying occupation. Default insurance granted by the government to small and minority farms was highlighted by 5% of the farmers. Coincidentally, 2% of the total farmers ranked seven of the suggestions at the same preference level (Table 1).

Tier 3 comprised over a dozen suggestions, including but not limited to reducing acreage requirements for agricultural tax breaks, expanding opportunities to engage young farmers to start farming, educating young people about agriculture and food nexus, compensating small farmers' participation in all educational activities, introducing a policy to eat what you grow, acknowledge and reward farmers' hard work, profitable product pricing based on the production costs, financial support to establish and run small farmers' association, and reduce government regulations in farming.

The survey findings indicate that small and minority producers need support in several areas, such as interest-free loans, assured markets for their produce, the implementation of the "Eat What You Grow" policy, affordable technology focused on small farms, free agricultural education in higher studies, crop and livestock insurance to lower production risks, and fewer government regulations to ensure farming remains a gratifying occupation. Study findings would be useful to policymakers in formulating policies to promote small farm resilience and, by extension, to professionals in transferring emerging techniques and technologies to enhance farm profitability.

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Table 1. Farmers’ opinion on making farming a gratifying occupation as revealed by a study conducted in 2022, Maryland, USA.

Activities	Frequency	Percent
Default insurance for small and minority farmers	6	5
Operating cooperatives to promote small farmers	3	2
Promoting organic produce	2	2
Support for keeping bees alive	2	2
Promoting diversification to reduce risk in farming	2	2
Easy access to farm improvement grants	2	2
Provide financial and moral support for small farmers	2	2
Complete tax exemption for small farmers	2	2

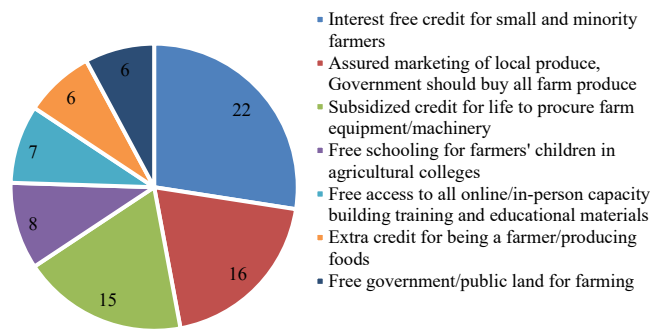


Figure 1. Farmers’ opinions on making farming a gratifying occupation (figures are in %) as revealed by a study conducted in 2022 in Maryland, USA.

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