



Trempealeau County Conservation Survey Report

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**Survey Research Center Report 2014/4
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to gather information and opinions about conservation issues from Trempealeau County farmland owners. In December 2013, the SRC mailed surveys to all 1,567 farmland owners on a list provided by Trempealeau County. The initial mailing was followed by reminder postcards and a second mailing to non-respondents. The response rate was 43% (672 usable returns).

One in four respondents rented land from another landowner in 2013. The average number of landowners from which land was rented was 3.8. A third of the rentals included a written contract. Among those with a written contract, about four in ten contracts contained requirements to follow conservation practices.

Slightly less than half of respondents said they rented land to others in 2013. On average, respondents who rented to others had 1.3 renters. Four in ten rentals included a written contract. Among rentals to others with a written contract, half included requirements to follow conservation practices.

Slightly over half of respondents said they have cropped acreage adjacent to a water body.

Corn accounted for the largest percentage of land use (33%), followed by hay (16%), woodland (15%), and soybeans (14%).

One in four respondents reported having a compliant written plan for the Conservation Reserve Program or a Forest Management Plan. One in five said they have a written plan compliant with the Farmland Preservation Program.

Stream side grass buffers were the most frequent conservation practice (27%), followed by field borders (20%) and filter strips (19%). The most frequent use for field borders is to provide wildlife habitat; filter strips were most often used to capture sediment; stream side grass buffers were most frequently used to capture sediment and to provide wildlife habitat.

Filter strips and field borders were typically less than 20 feet in width. Stream side grass buffers were most likely to be 10 feet to 19 feet wide or over 50 feet wide. The largest percentage of stream side forest buffers were 10 feet to 19 feet in width.

Over three fourths of respondents said they use no till followed by reduced till (51%).

Majorities of respondents ranging from 69% to 98% agreed or strongly agreed with each of a series of six statements about conservation: Conservation is an important part of their farming practices; installing conservation practices is cost-effective; maintaining conservation practices is cost-effective; farmers have a responsibility to protect the soil; farmers should receive cash incentives to participate in conservation programs; and farmers should face negative consequences if they do not follow conservation guidelines.

Agronomy service providers, UW-Extension, and farming publications were the most important sources of information about cropping practices. Respondents preferred information via printed materials compared to other methods.

Survey Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gather information and opinions about conservation issues from Trempealeau County farmland owners. Trempealeau County officials chose to work with the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls to collect these data and analyze the results.

Survey Methods

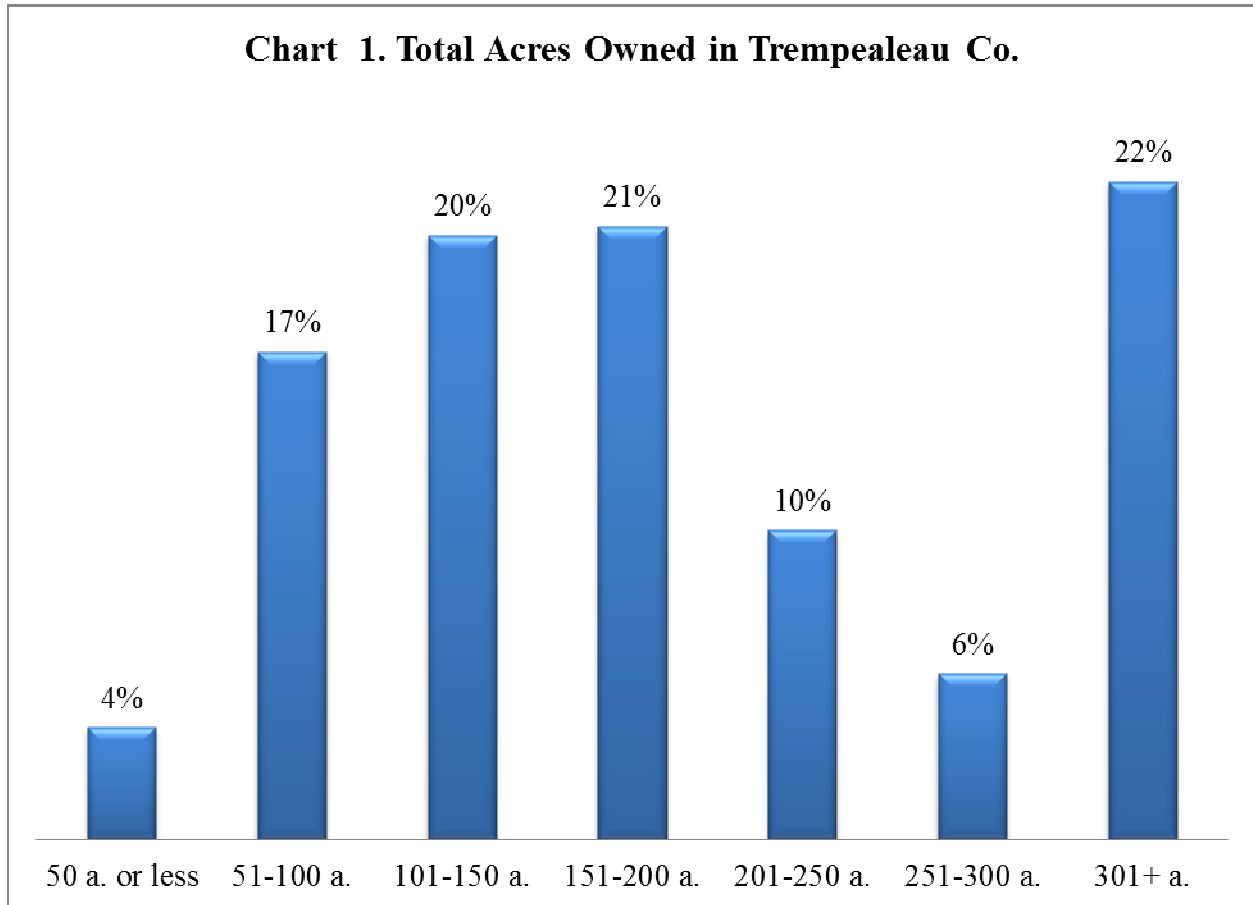
The Trempealeau County Land Management Department supplied a mailing list of all farmland owners in the county. In December 2013, the SRC mailed surveys to all 1,567 owners on the list. The initial mailing was followed by reminder postcards and a second mailing to non-respondents. The response rate was 43% (672 usable returns). The results provided in this report are expected to be accurate to within plus/minus 2.9 percent with 95 percent confidence.

Any survey has to be concerned with “non-response bias.” Non-response bias refers to a situation in which people who do not return a questionnaire have opinions that are systematically different from the opinions of those who return their surveys. Based upon a standard statistical analysis that is described in **Appendix A**, the Survey Research Center concludes that non-response bias is not a significant concern for this survey.

Appendix B contains a copy of the survey questionnaire with a complete quantitative summary of responses by question.

Land Ownership Patterns

Respondents were asked to indicate the total number of acres owned in Trempealeau County. The responses are shown in Chart 1 and indicate that 41% own 101 to 200 acres, while 22% own over 300 acres. There were relatively few respondents who own 50 acres or less (4%).

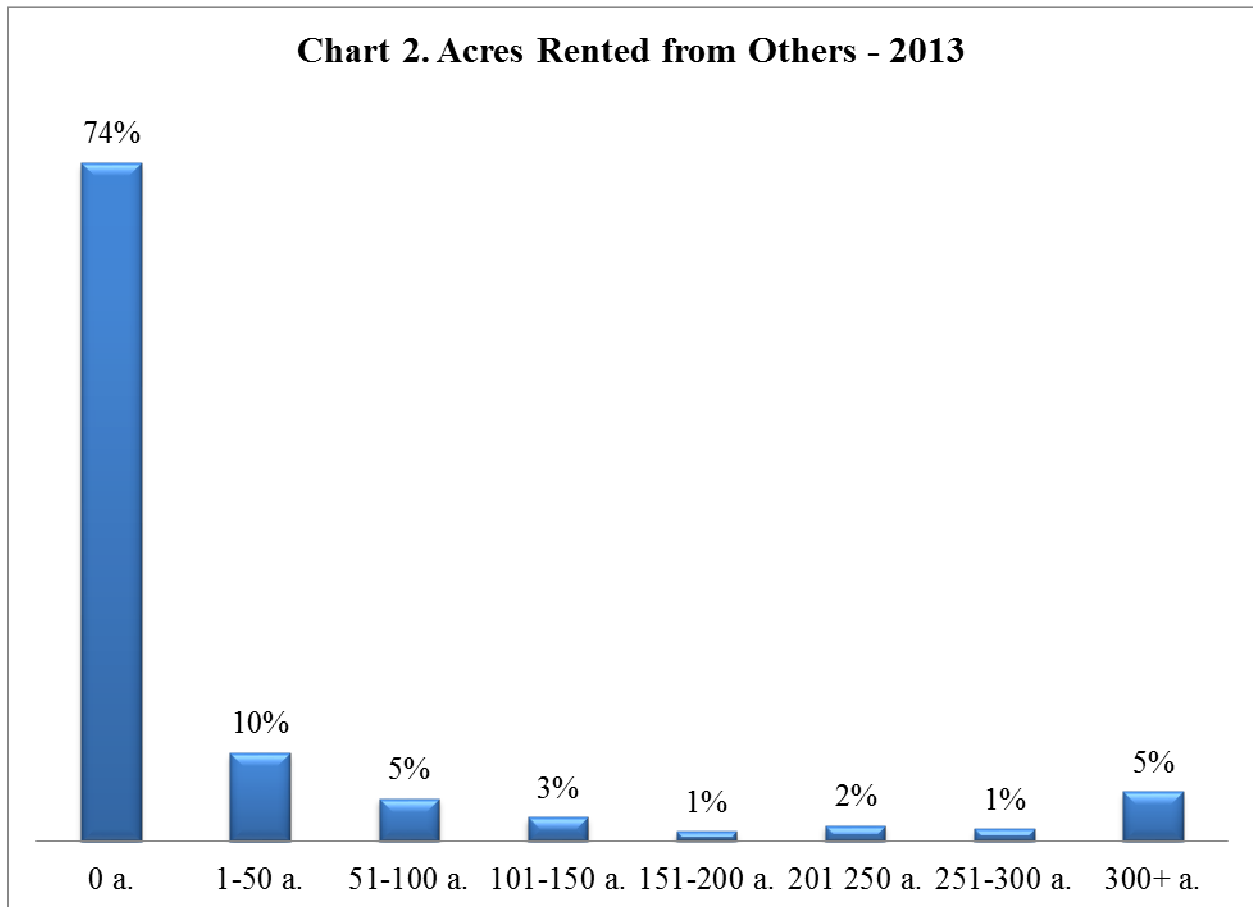


The SRC performed statistical tests to see if there were significant differences in the responses of the survey questions based on the number of acres owned by the respondent. The tests revealed only 5 variables in which there were statistically significant differences.

- Landowners with 200 or more acres were more likely to rent additional land from other owners.
- Owners of 51 to 150 acres were more likely to rent land to others.
- As the number of acres increased so did the likelihood that the respondent has a compliant written plan for a conservation program. The only exception was the Wildlife Habitat Incentive, in which there were no differences based on the number of acres owned.
- Landowners with over 200 acres were more likely to use mulch till and vertical till. Respondents with 300 or more acres were more likely to use no till.
- The importance of seed companies and agronomy service providers is rated higher among respondents who own 300 acres or more.

Land Rentals from Other Owners.

As shown in Chart 2, three-fourths of respondents did not rent land from other landowners in 2013. Among respondents who said they rented land from others, the largest proportion, said they rented 50 acres or less (10% of the total number of respondents), followed by 5% who rented 51 to 100 acres and 5% who rented over 300 acres.



Respondents who rented land from others were next asked the type of arrangement (fixed cash or other such as flexible cash or crop share) and how many acres were involved. The results are shown in Chart 3 and Chart 4.

Chart 3 indicates that rentals from others typically involved both fixed cash payments and other types of arrangements such as flexible cash or crop share. Eighty-six percent of respondents indicated that they use both types of payments, while 12% said they use only a fixed cash payment, and just 2% used only other forms of payment.

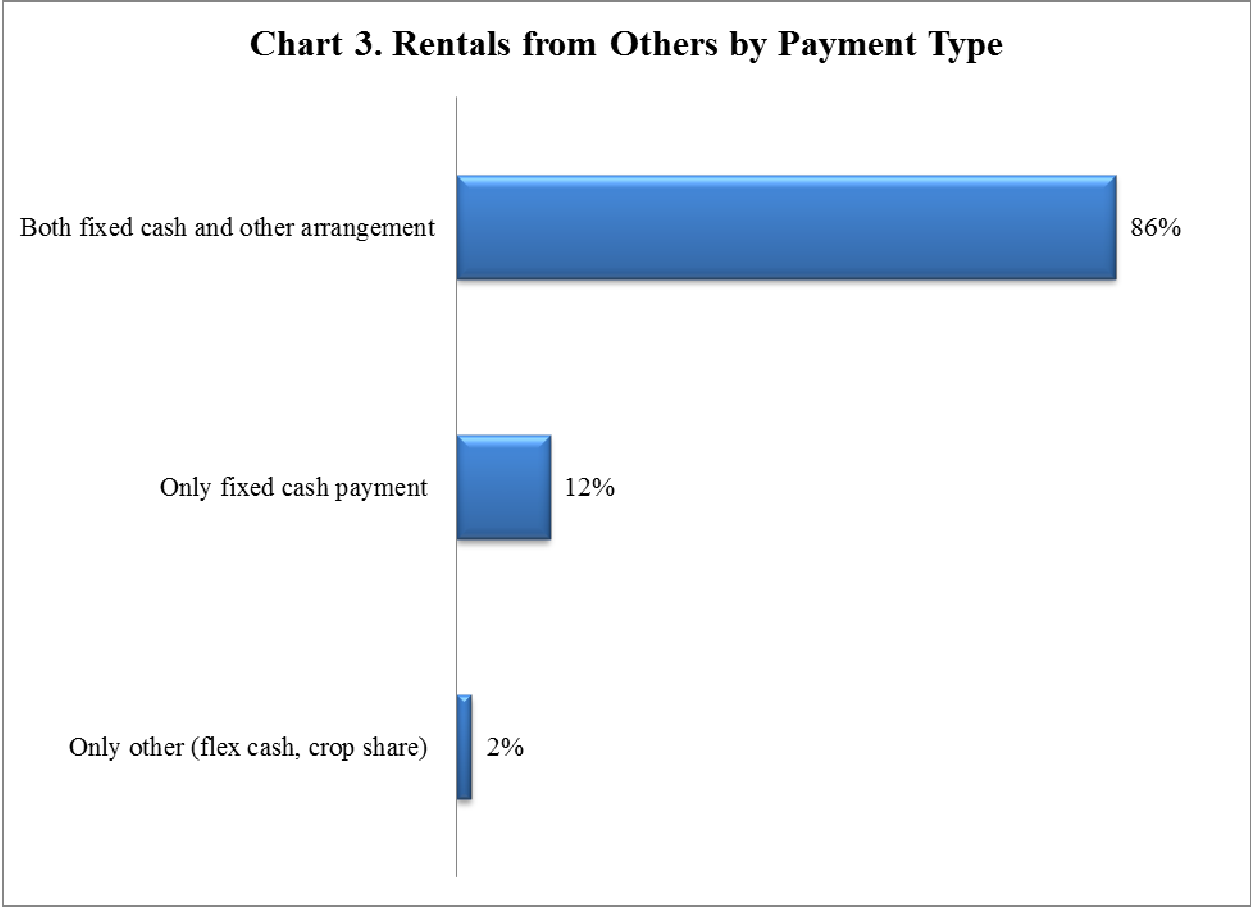
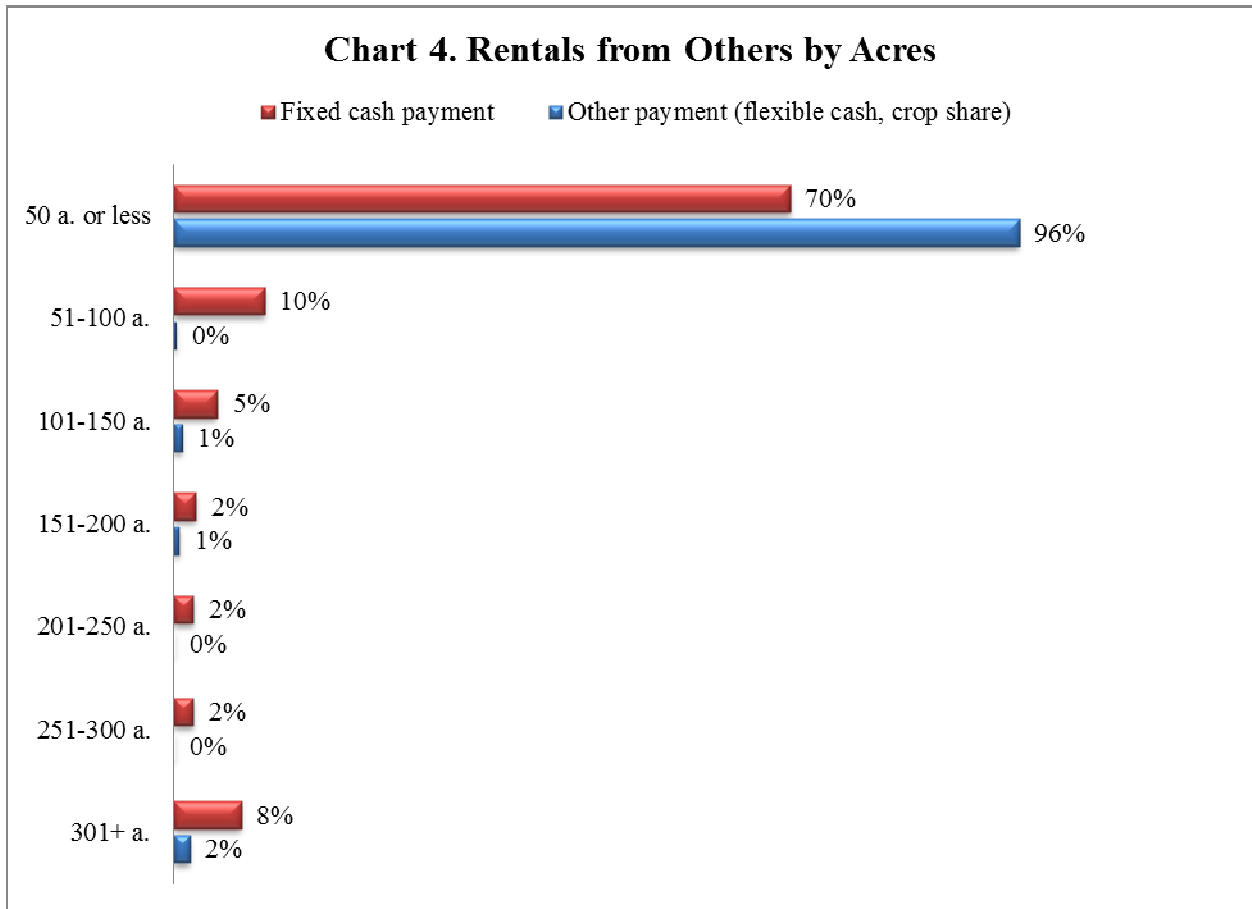
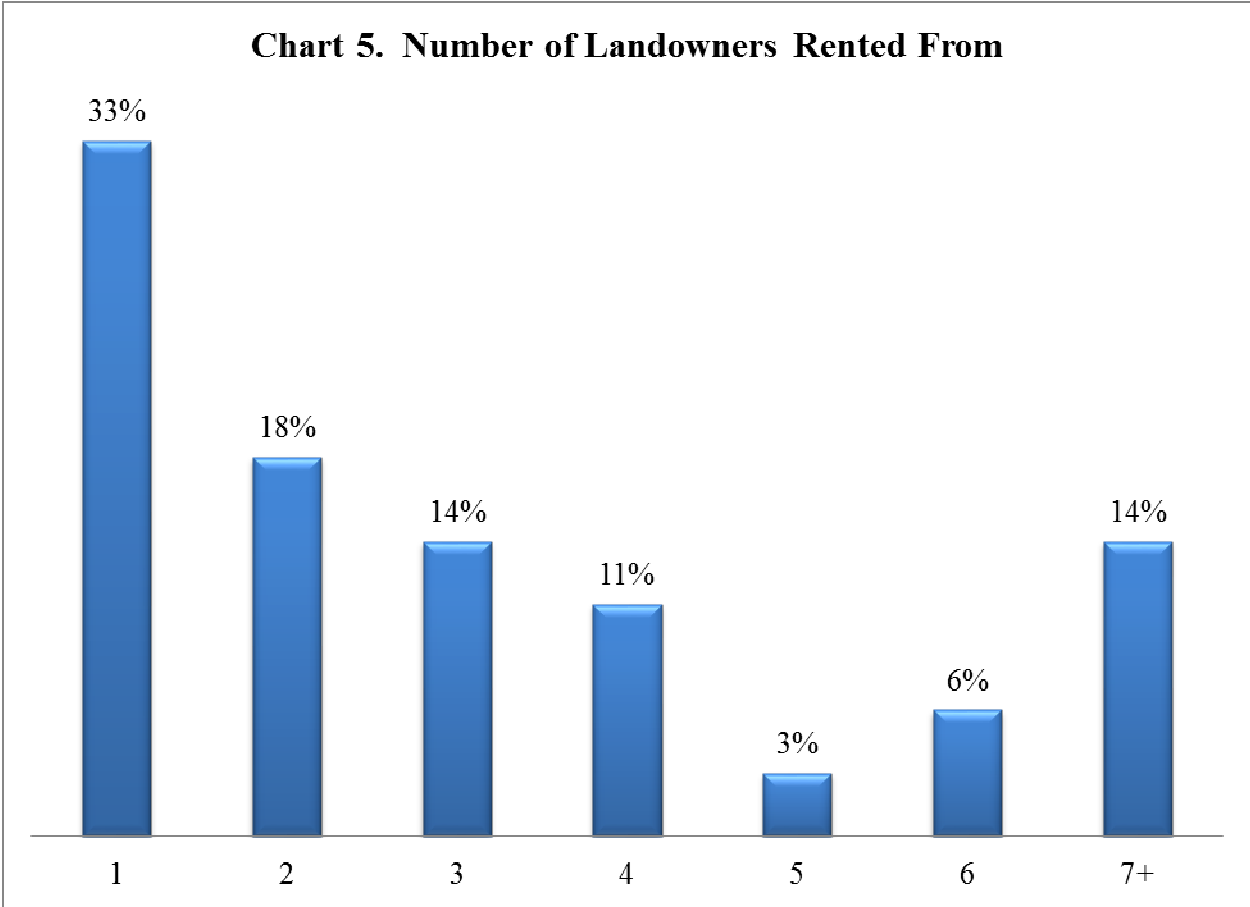


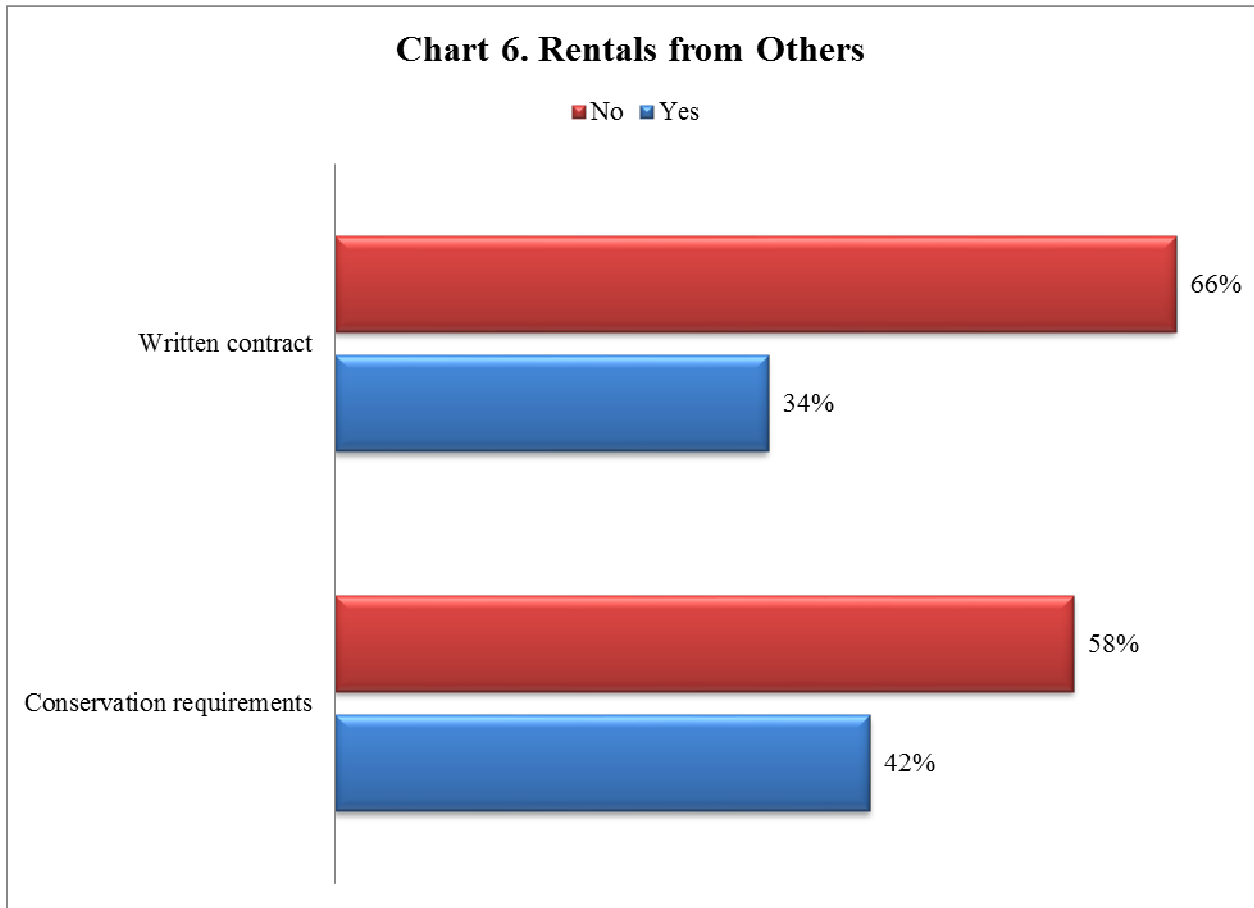
Chart 4 shows the number of acres involved in rentals by type of payment. Seven in ten rentals from others for a fixed cash payment were for 50 acres or less, while nearly all (96%) of rentals from others for other types of payment were for 50 acres or less.



Respondents who rented land from others were asked to indicate the total number of other land owners from whom they rented land in 2013. The results are shown in Chart 5. Among those who rented land from others, about a third rented land from a single owner, while 43% rented from 2 to 4 land owners. The maximum was 27 and the mean number of landowners was 3.8.



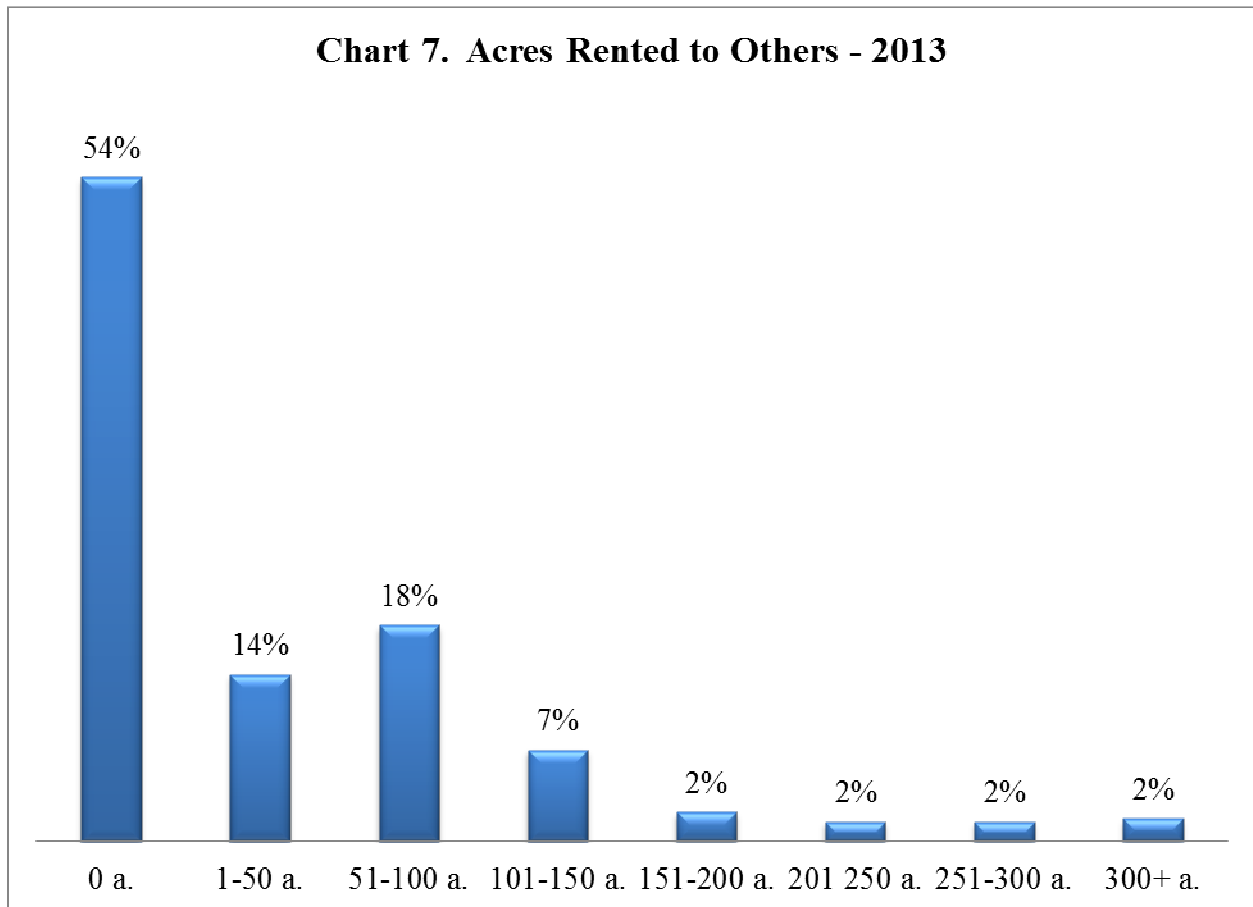
As shown in Chart 6, among respondents who rented land from others, a third included a written contract. Among respondents with a written contract four in ten respondents said their contract included requirements to follow conservation practices.



Land Rentals to Other Owners.

Respondents were next asked a series of questions about land rentals to other land owners.

As shown in Chart 7, 54% of respondents did not rent land to others in 2013. About a third of rentals to others were for 100 acres or less.



Respondents who rented land to others were next asked the type of arrangement (fixed cash or other such as flexible cash or crop share) and how many acres were involved. The results are shown in Chart 8 and Chart 9.

Chart 8 indicates that rentals to others typically involved both fixed cash payments and other types of arrangements such as flexible cash or crop share. Over 90 percent of respondents indicated that they use both types of payments, while 8% said they use only a fixed cash payment, and just 2% used only other forms of payment.

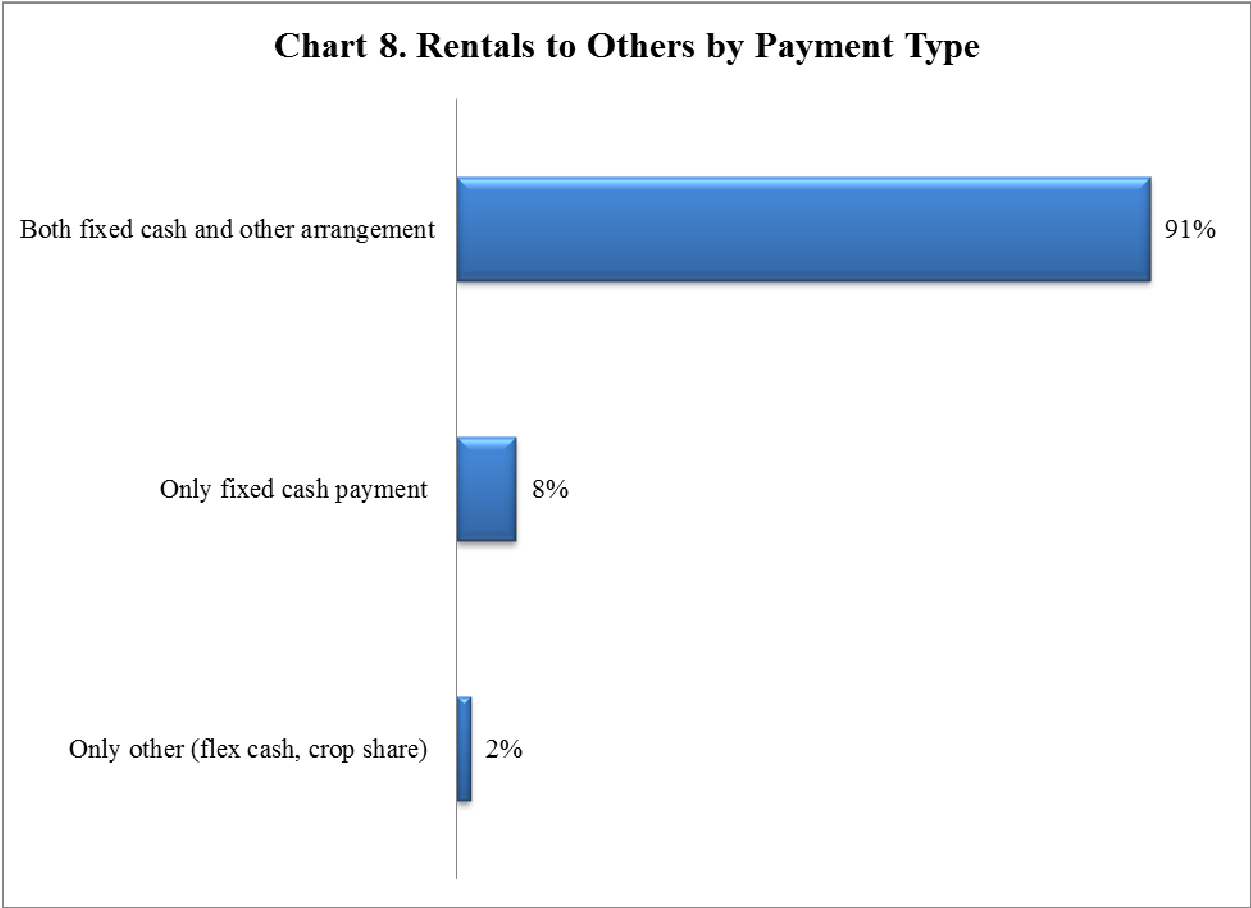
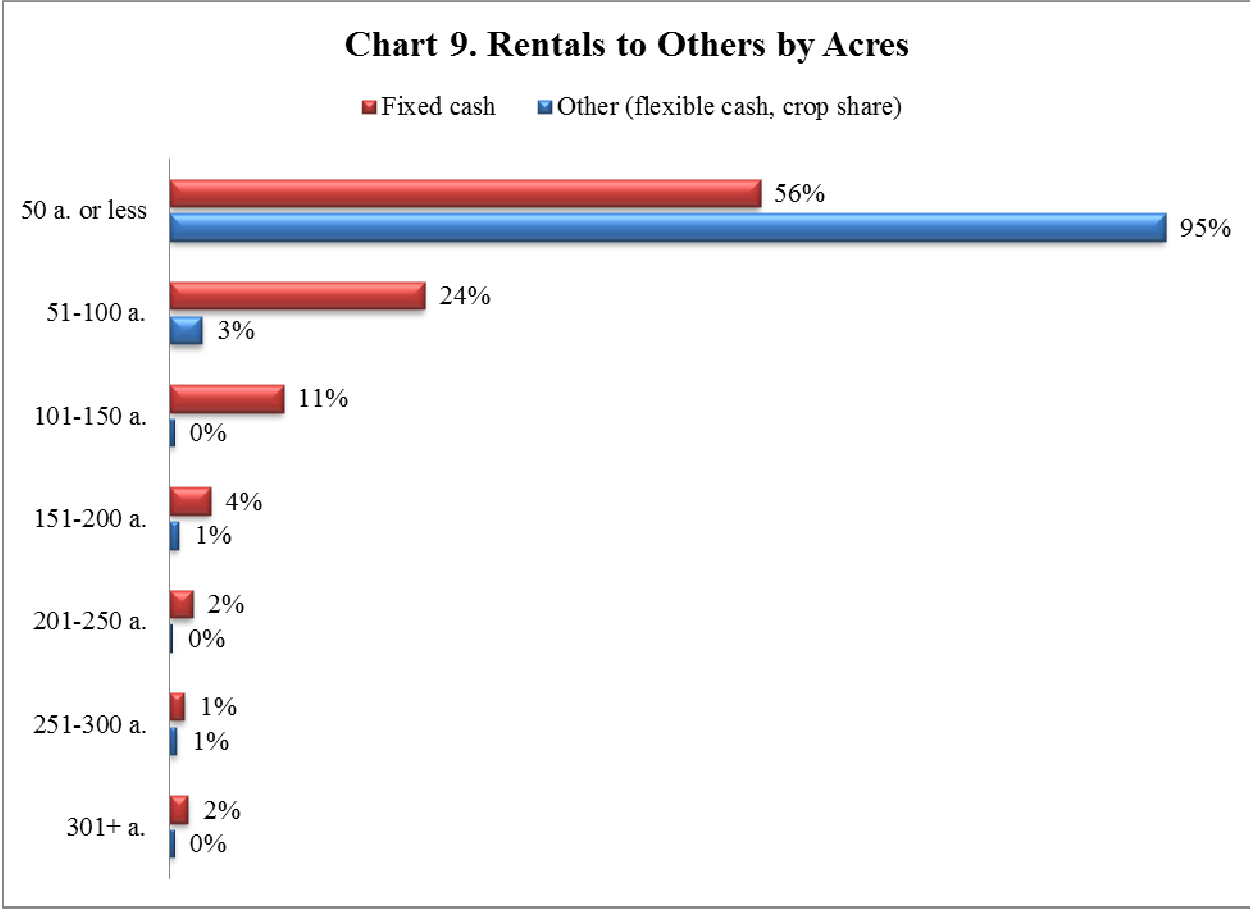
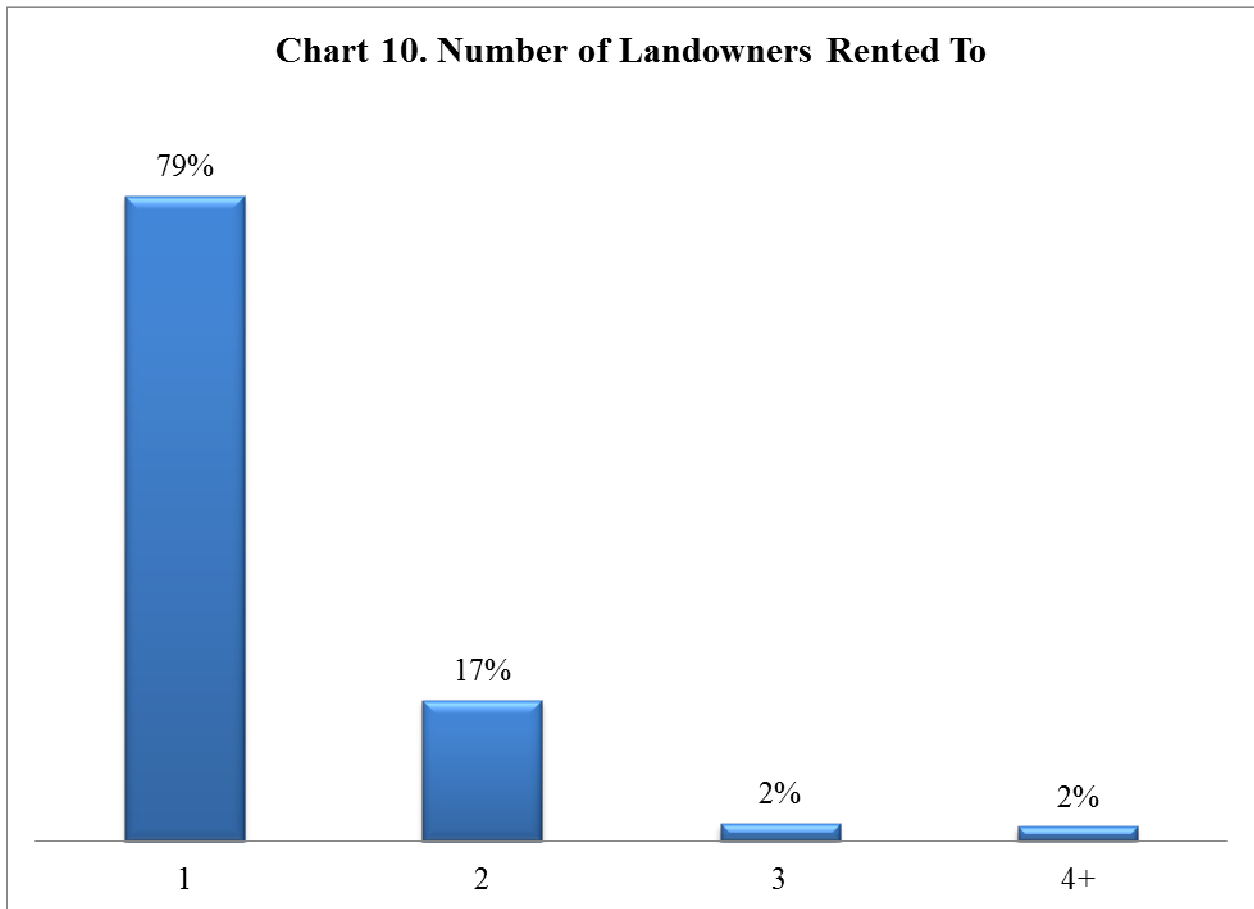


Chart 9 shows the number of acres involved in rentals to others by type of payment. Fifty-six percent of rentals to others for a fixed cash payment were for 50 acres or less, while nearly all (95%) of rentals to others for other types of payment were for 50 acres or less.



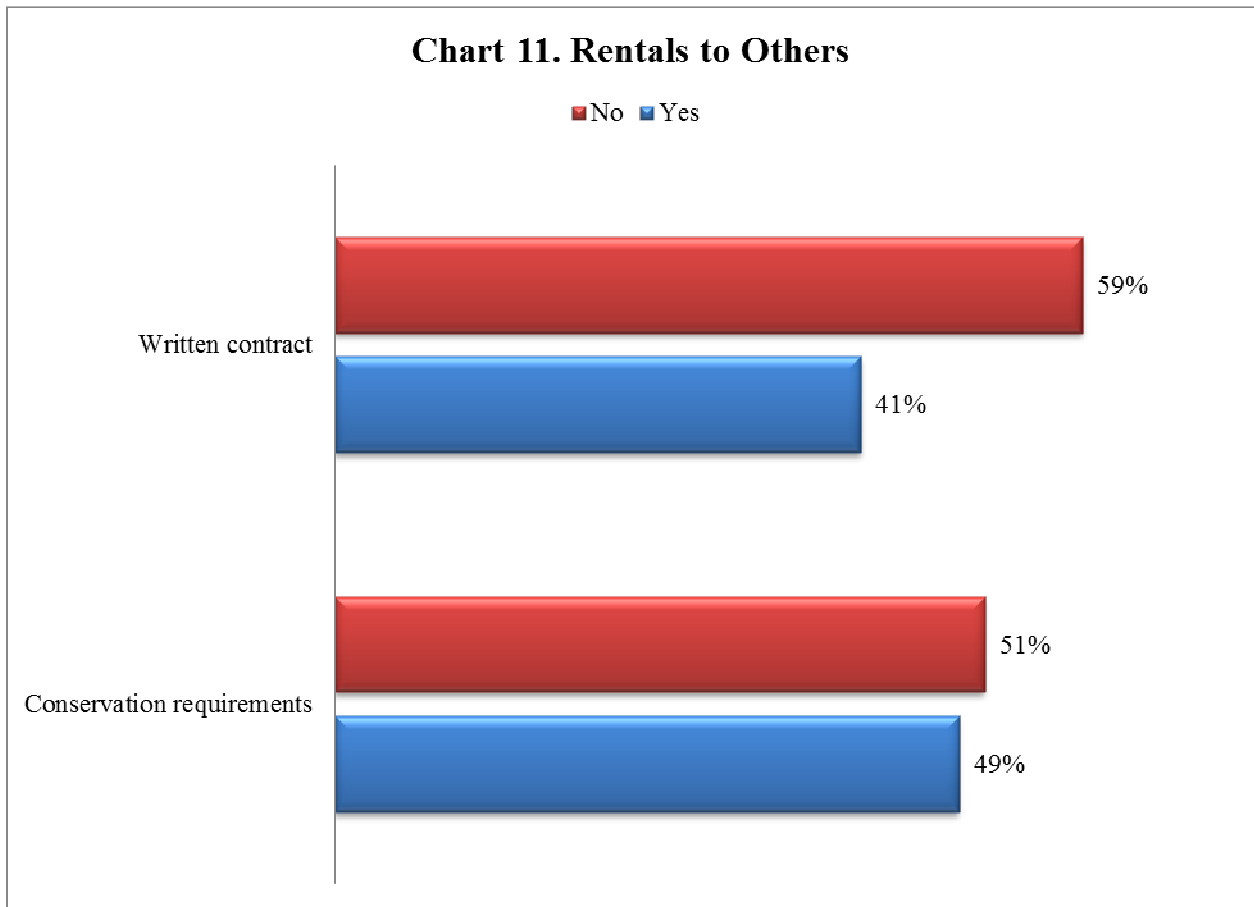
Respondents who rented land to others were asked to indicate the total number of other land owners to whom they rented land in 2013. The results are shown in Chart 10. Among those who rented land from others, about eight in ten had only one renter. The maximum was 20 renters and the mean was 1.3.

Compared to the data in Chart 5, landowners who rent land from others were more likely to rent from more individuals (avg. 3.8) than landowners who rented land to others (avg. 1.3).

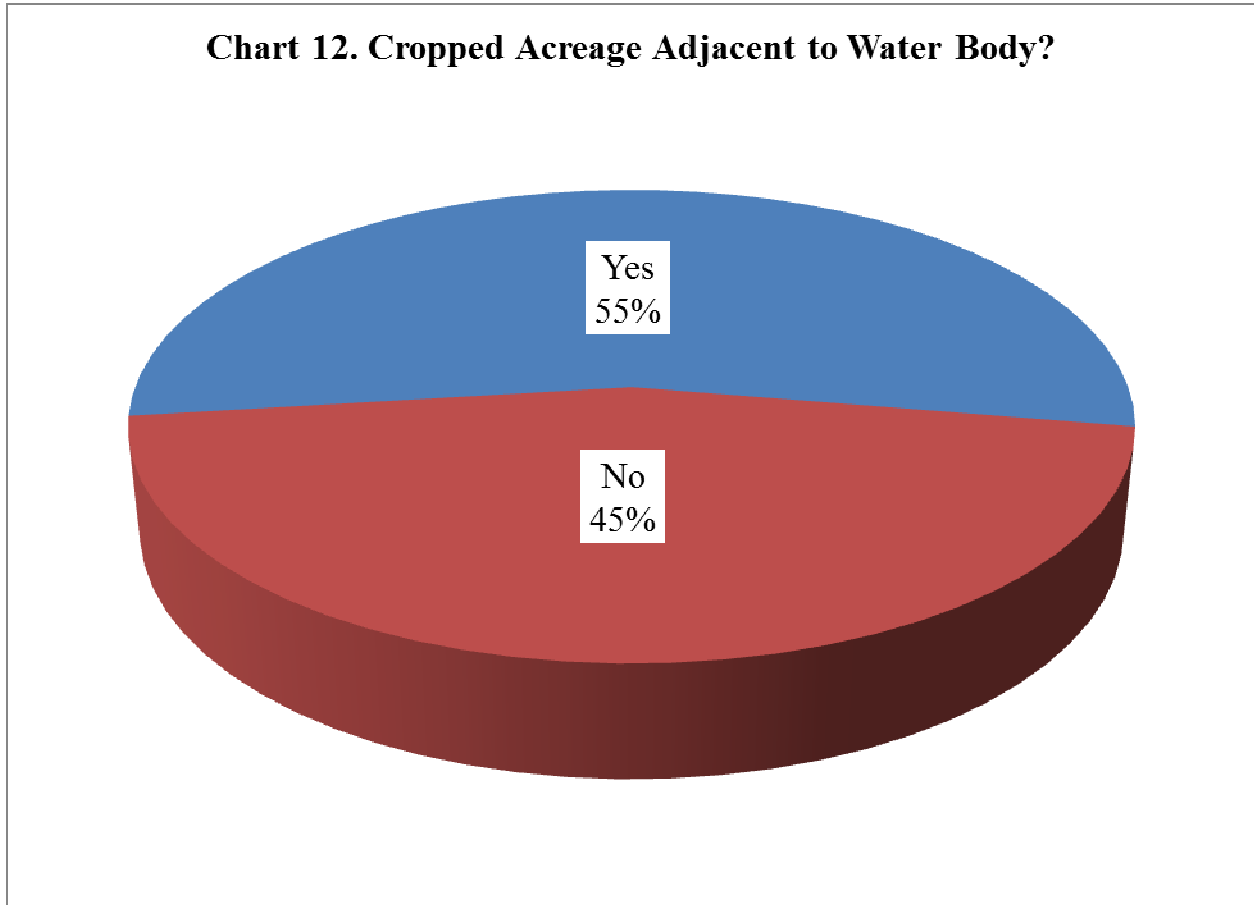


As shown in Chart 11, among respondents who rented to others, about four in ten included a written contract. Among respondents with a written contract, approximately half the respondents said their contract included requirements to follow conservation practices.

Rentals to others are slightly less likely to include a written contract than rentals from others. Similarly, written contracts to others are slightly less likely to contain conservation agreements than rentals from others. (See Chart 6).



When asked if their cropped land was adjacent to a water body, slightly over half of respondents said yes (Chart 12).



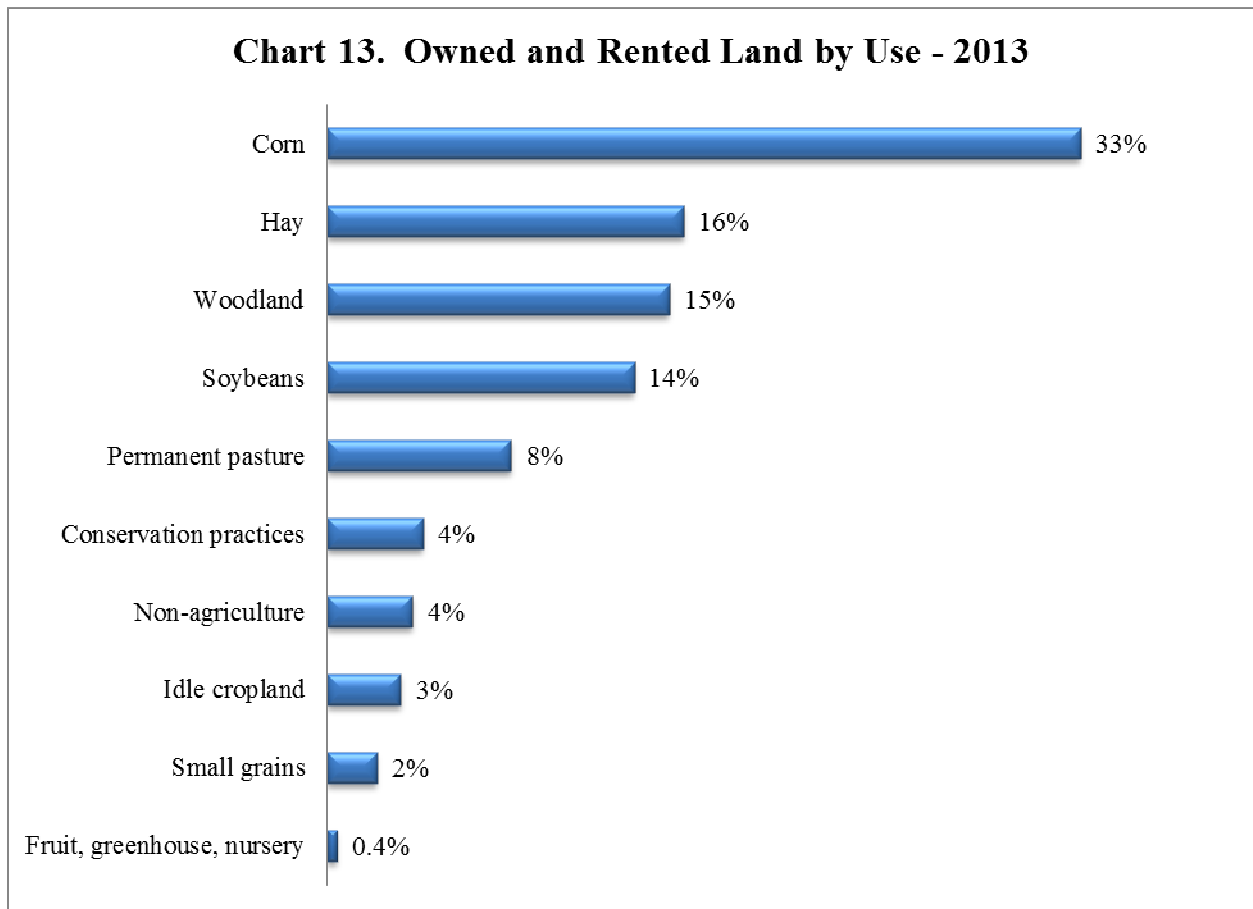
The SRC performed statistical tests to see if respondents farming cropped acreage adjacent to a water body were more likely to have a compliant written plan for a conservation program or were more likely to have conservation requirements included in a written rental agreement. The results indicate there are no statistically significant differences.

Cropping

The next group of questions was about cropping topics. Respondents were asked to enter the percentage of land owned and rented by the types of crops and uses in 2013. Categories included the following: soybeans, corn, small grains, hay, conservation practices (field borders, buffers, grassed waterways), idle cropland, fruits, green-house, or nursery crops, permanent pasture, woodland not in fruit production, and non-agricultural uses (dwellings, buildings, structure, roads, wasteland not in conservation practice).

As shown in Chart 13, corn accounted for a third of the acreage in 2013 among respondents. Hay, woodland, or soybeans comprised about 15% each.

Permanent pasture, conservation practices, non-agricultural uses, idle cropland, small grains, and fruit/greenhouse/nursery comprised relatively small percentages of the total.



Respondents were asked to indicate if they had a written plan that is compliant with any of nine conservation programs listed in the survey. The survey also contained space to enter other programs not listed. As shown in Chart 14, more than nine in ten respondents indicated they had a compliant plan with at least one conservation program.

Chart 14. Percent with Any Type of Conservation Plan

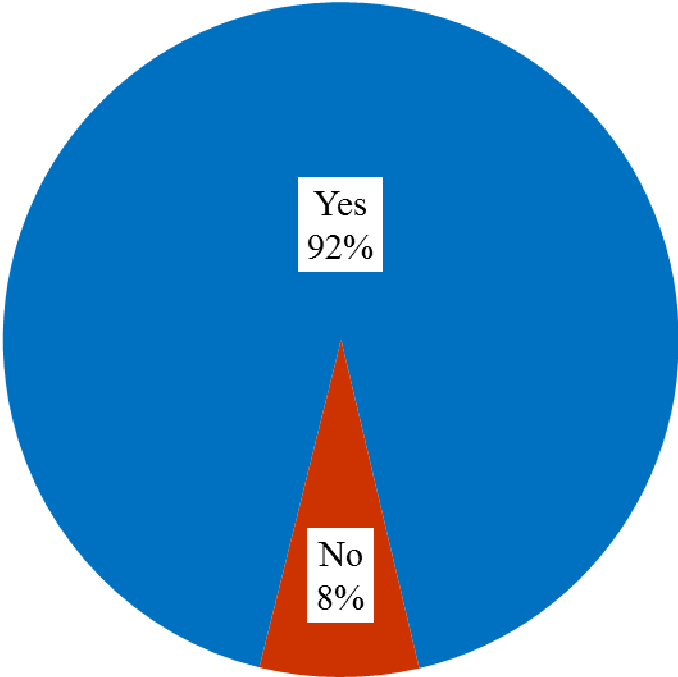
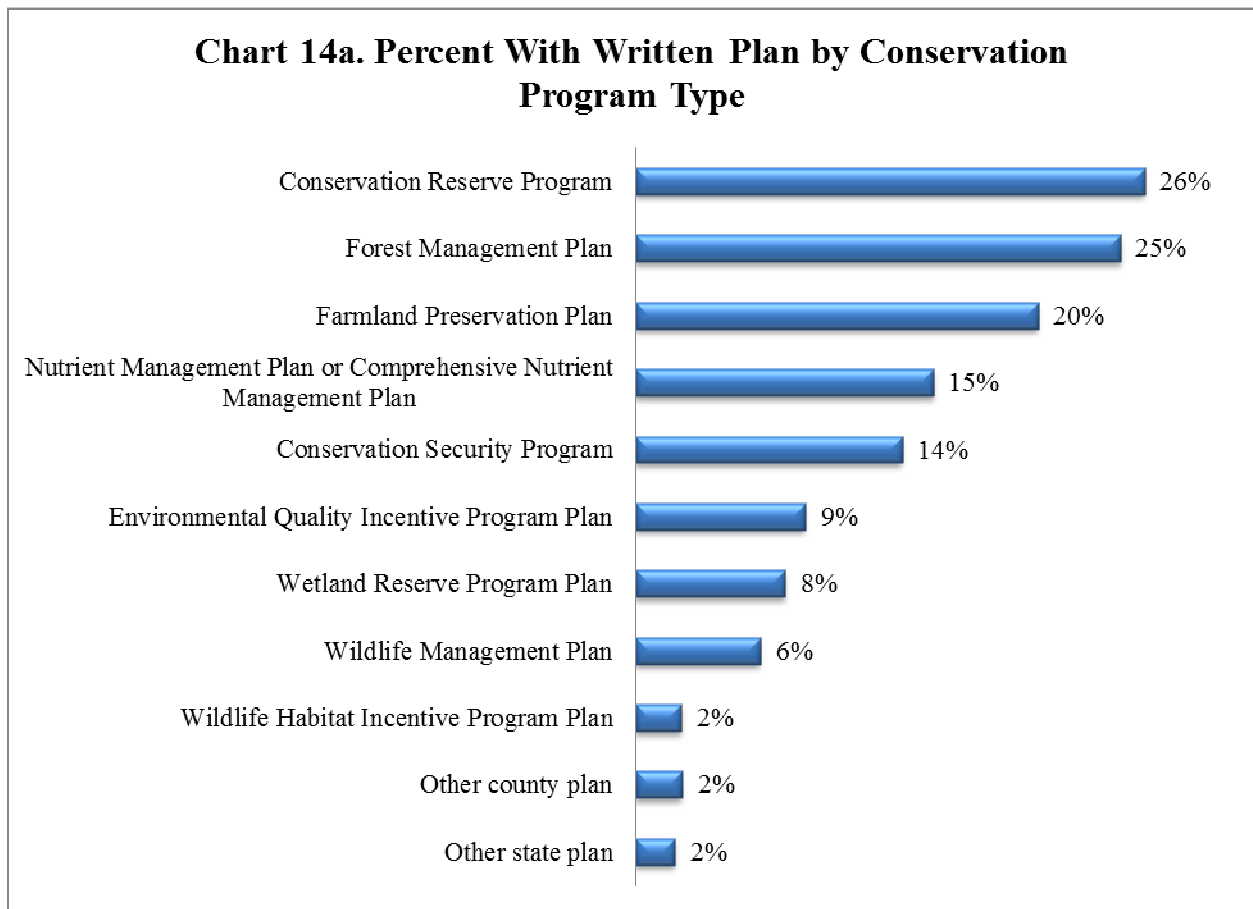


Chart 14a shows the percentages by type of plan. About one in four respondents said they had a compliant written plan for the Conservation Reserve Program and a Forest Management Plan.

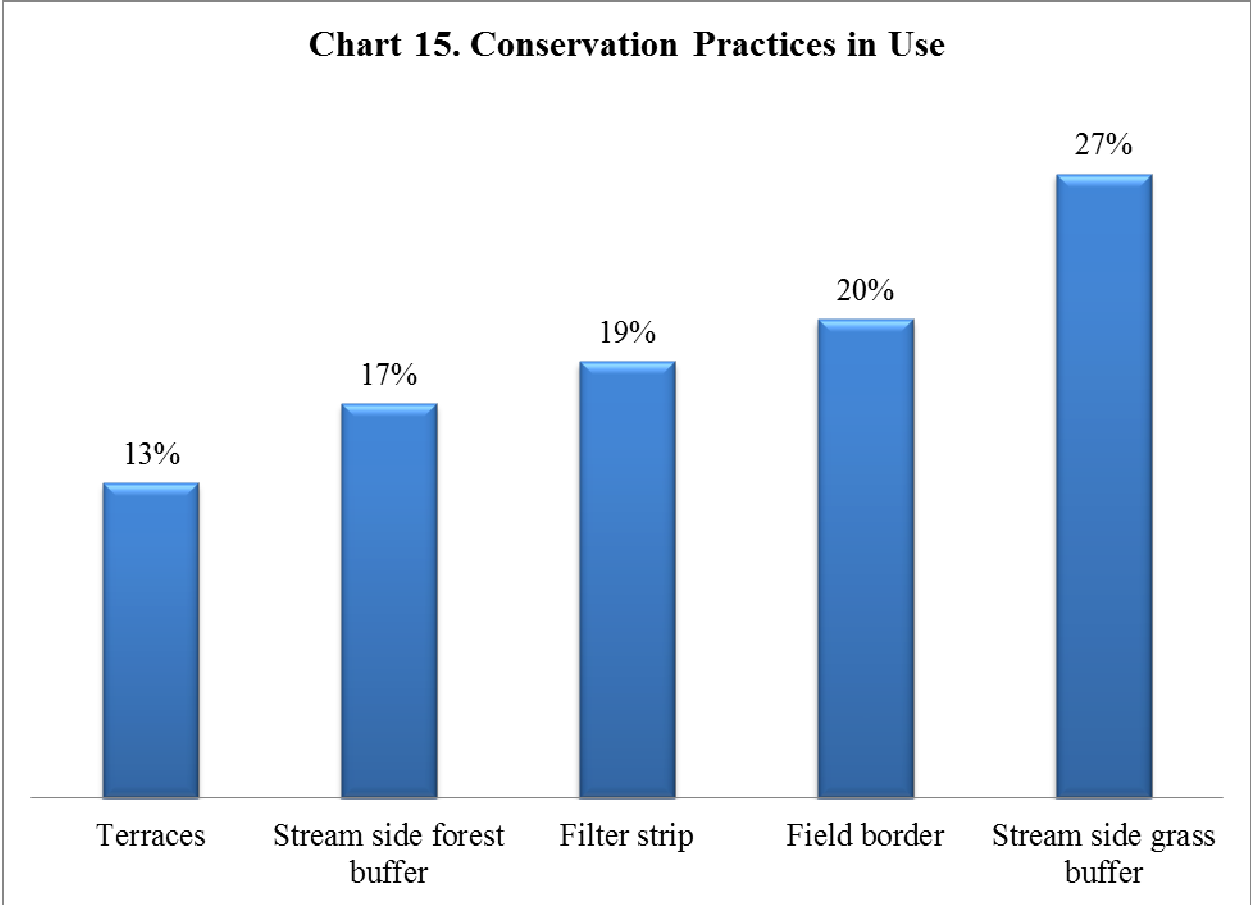
Close behind, 20% of respondents have a compliant plan for the Farmland Preservation Program. Less than 10% of respondents said they have a compliant written plan for the Environmental Quality Incentive (EQIP) program, the Wetland Reserve Program, Wildlife Management Plan, the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, and other county or state programs.

Percentages total to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one program.

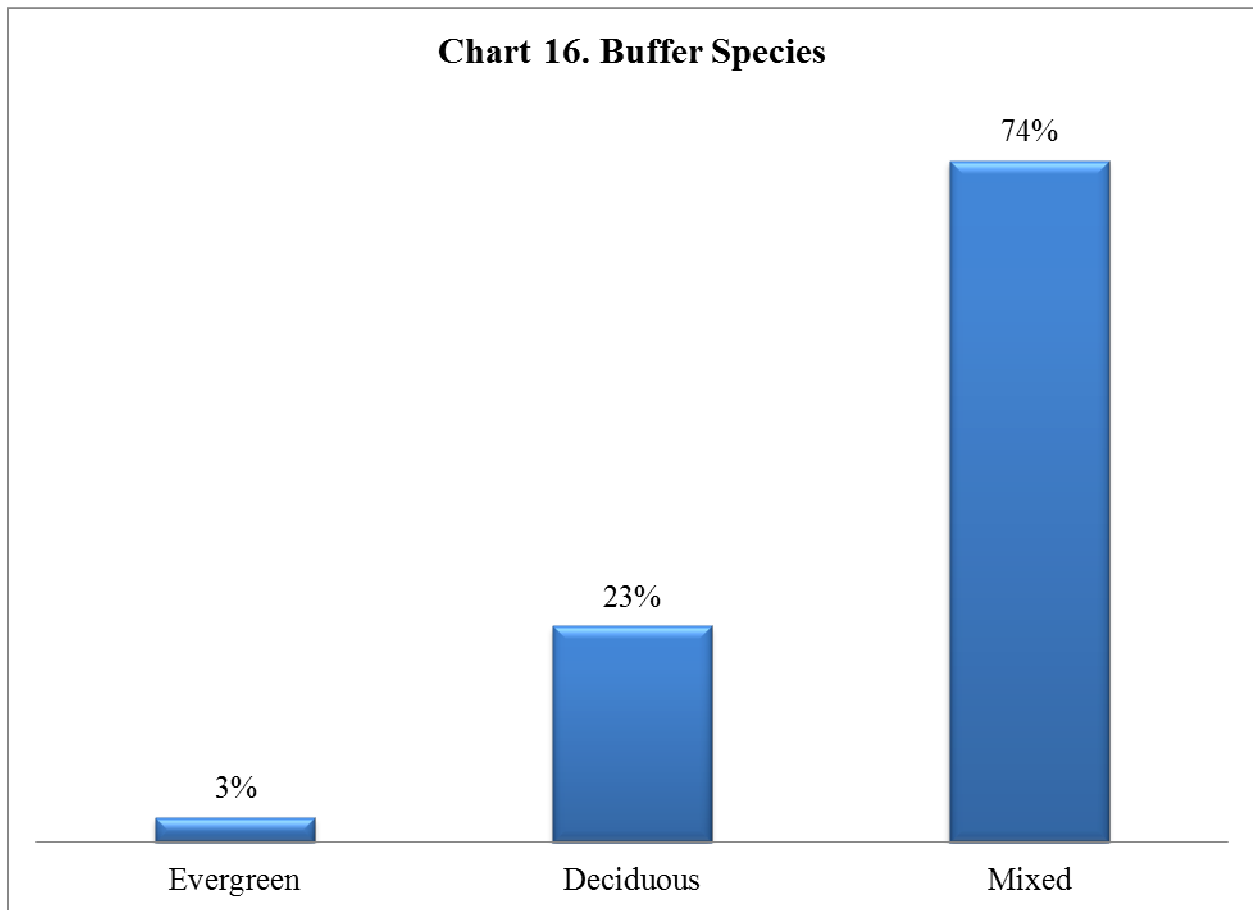


Conservation Practices

Respondents were asked to indicate the types of conservation practices they have in place. As shown in Chart 15, the most frequent practice was a stream side grass buffer (27%). This was followed by field borders (20%), filter strip (19%), stream side forest buffer (17%), and terraces (13%).



As shown in Chart 16, three-fourths of respondents who have a stream side forest buffer said they use a mixture of evergreen and deciduous species in the buffer. Twenty-three percent said they use only deciduous species, and only three percent use evergreen species exclusively.

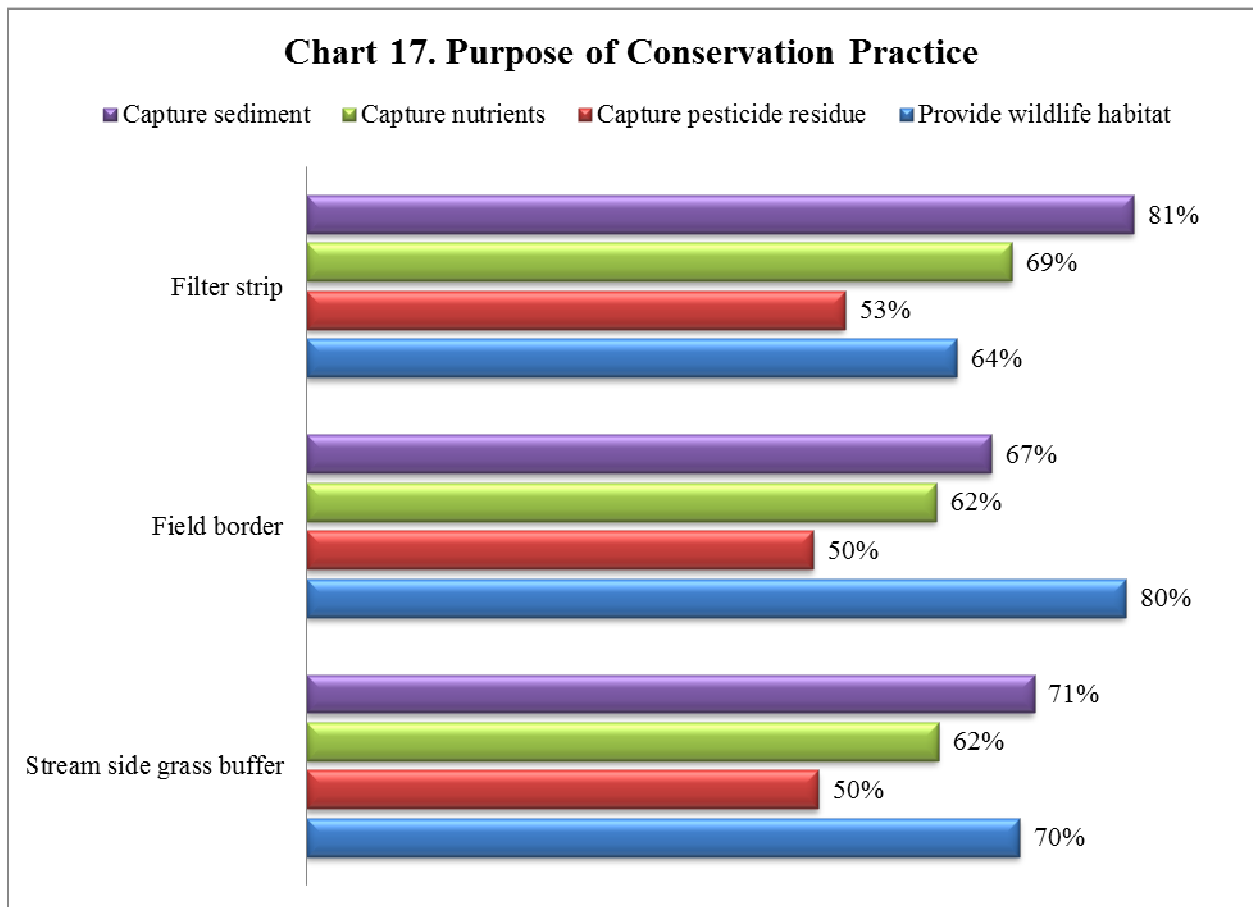


Respondents were asked to indicate the functions of their filter strips, field borders, and stream side grass buffers. The responses are shown in Chart 17. Answer choices were to capture sediment (top bar), capture nutrients (second from top bar), capture pesticide residue (third from top bar), and provide wildlife habitat (bottom bar).

With respect to filter strips, the most frequent use was to capture sediment, which was listed by eight in ten respondents. Nutrient capture was the next most common (69%), followed by wildlife habitat (64%). Pesticide residue capture was chosen by 53%.

Respondents said the most frequent purpose for field borders is to provide wildlife habitat (80%). Sediment capture ranked second with 67%, followed by nutrient capture (62%) and pesticide residue capture (50%).

With respect to stream side grass buffers, sediment capture and wildlife habitat were both employed by about 7 of 10 landowners. Nutrient capture ranked third (62%), followed by pesticide residue capture (50%).



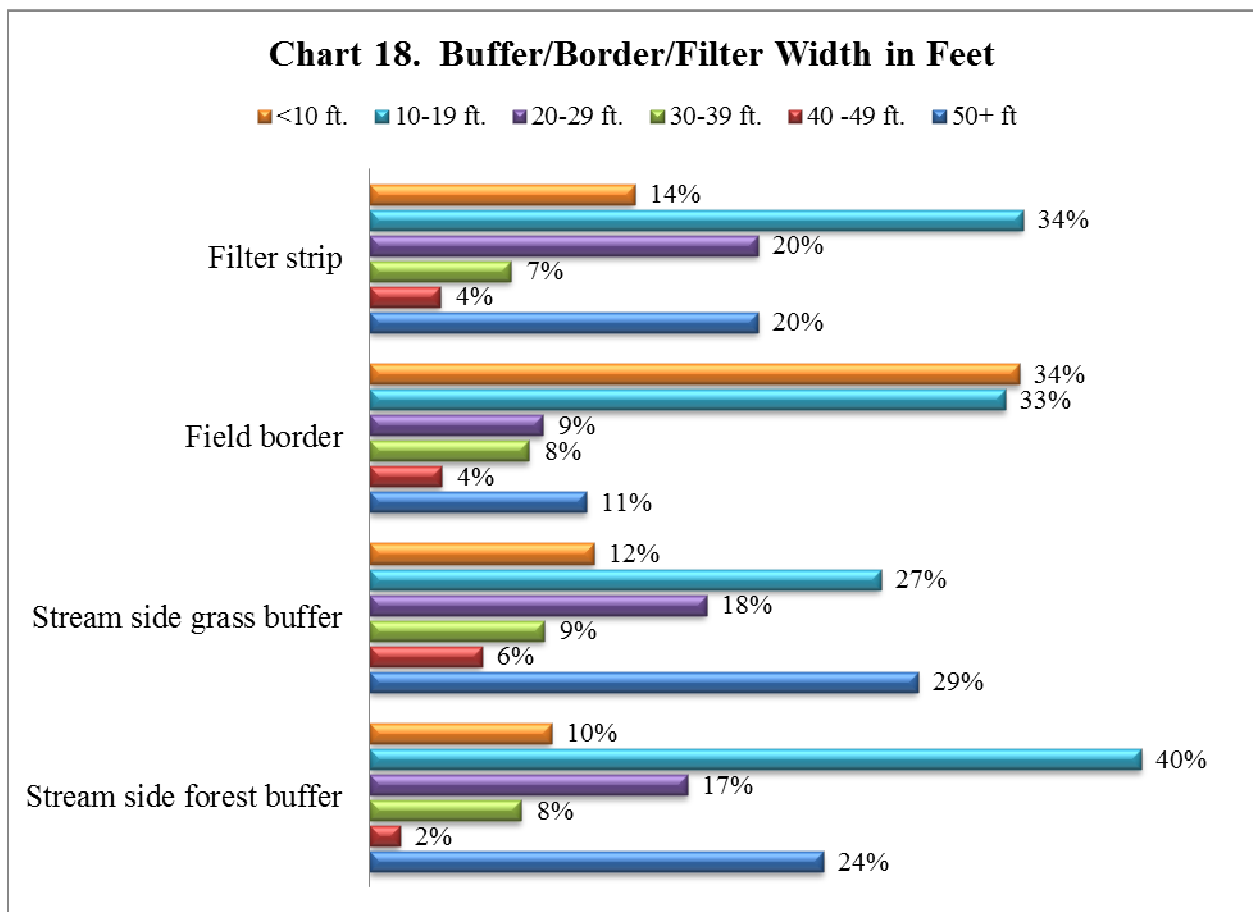
Respondents reported the width of their filter strips, buffers, and borders, and the results are shown in Chart 18. The top bar is less than 10 feet, second bar from the top is 10 to 19 feet, third bar from the top is 20 to 29 feet, fourth bar from the top is 30 to 39 feet, fifth bar from the top is 40 to 49 feet, and the bottom bar is 50 or more feet.

The most common filter strip width is 10 to 19 feet (34%).

Field borders tend to be less than 10 feet (34%) or 10 to 19 feet (33%).

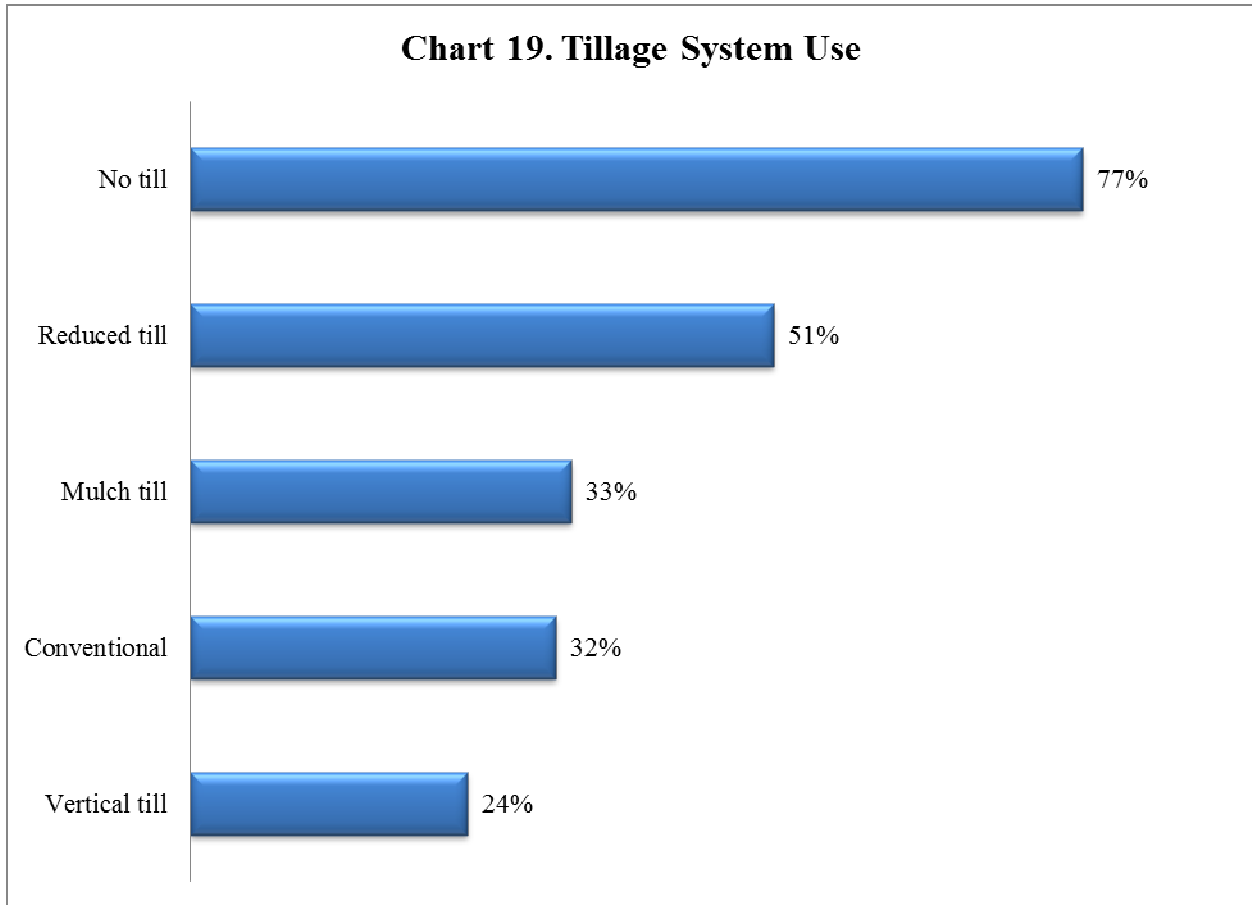
The most common stream side grass buffer widths are 50 feet or more (29%) or 10 to 19 feet (27%).

The most common stream side grass buffer widths is 10 to 19 feet.



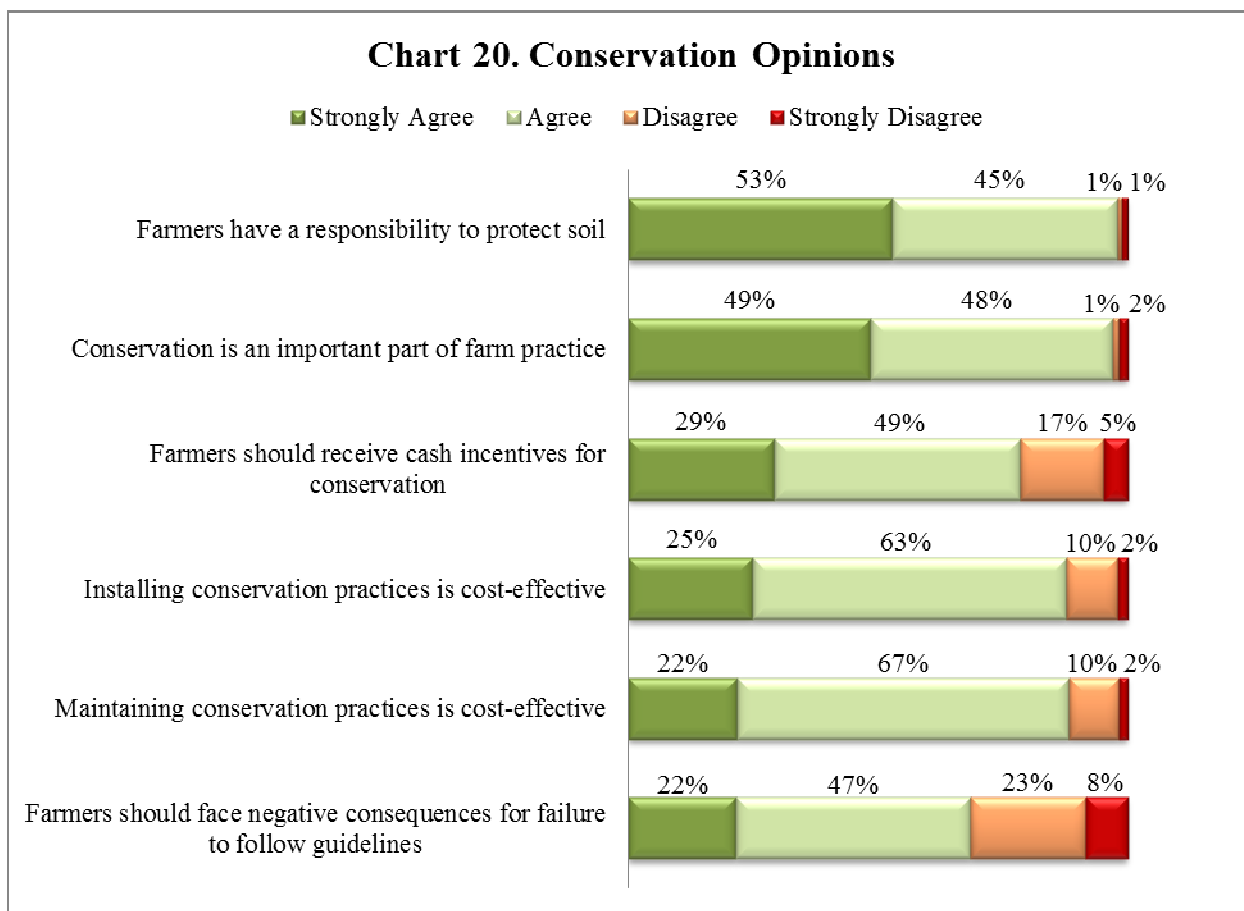
Tillage Systems

Respondents were given a list of tillage systems and asked to indicate which systems they used in their farm operation, and the results are shown in Chart 19 (the total percentage exceeds 100% because respondents could choose as many as apply). No till was the most frequent (77%). About half of respondents said they use reduced till. A third of respondents said they use either mulch till or conventional tillage systems. Only one in four respondents said they use vertical tillage such as Turbo Till.



Conservation Opinions

As shown in Chart 20, respondents were asked their level of agreement with six statements about conservation. Answer choices were strongly agree (left portion of each bar), agree (second from the left), disagree (second from the right), or strongly disagree (rightmost segment).



The largest portion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the six statements. Respondents most strongly agreed that farmers have a responsibility to protect soil (53% strongly agree and 45% agree) and that conservation is an important part of farm practice (49% strongly agree and 48% agree). The strength of agreement was not quite as high with respect to whether farmers should receive cash incentives for conservation. Nevertheless, a strong majority strongly agreed (29%) or agreed (49%) with this statement.

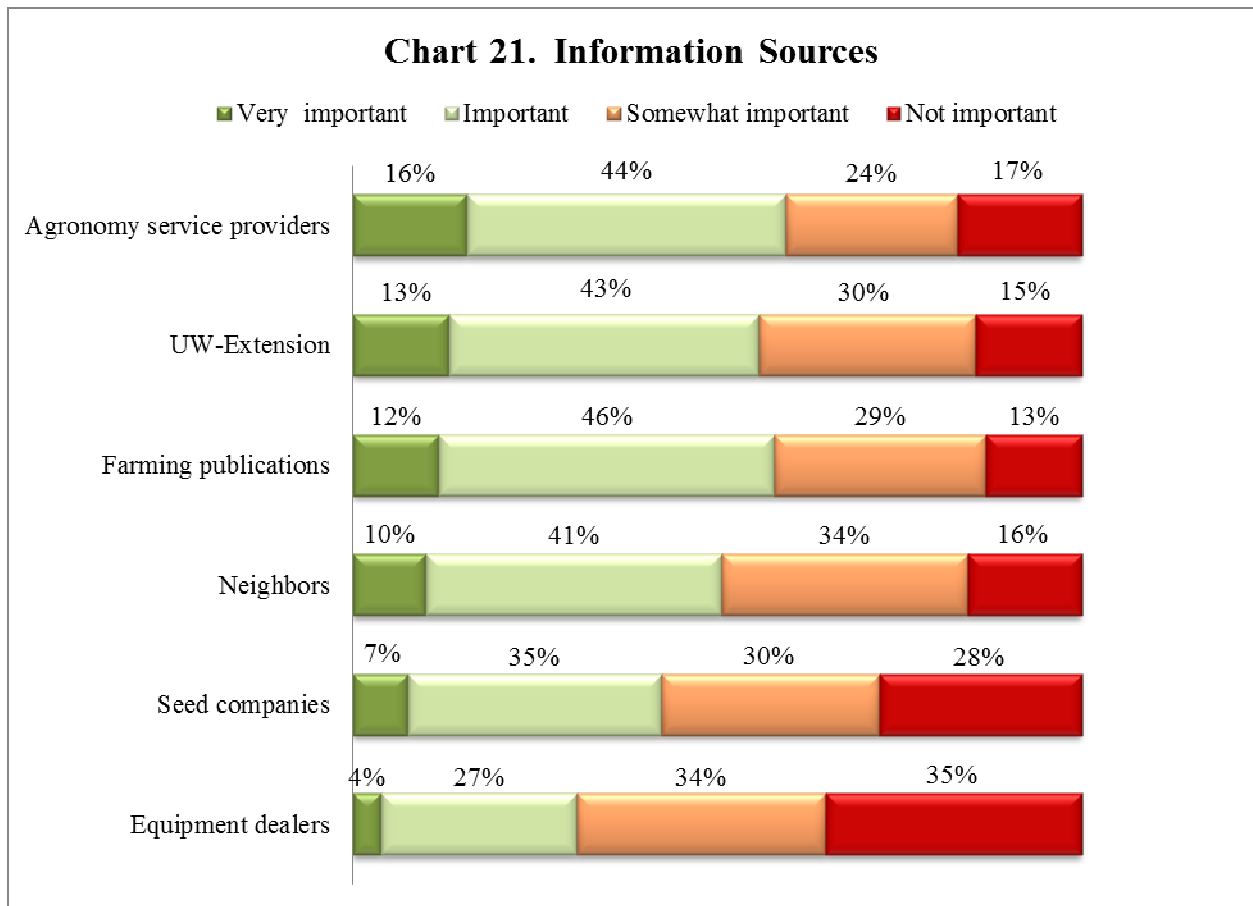
Large percentages of respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that installing conservation practices and maintaining conservation practices is cost-effective.

Nearly seven in ten respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that failure to follow conservation guidelines should have negative consequences. A substantial minority consisting of a third of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

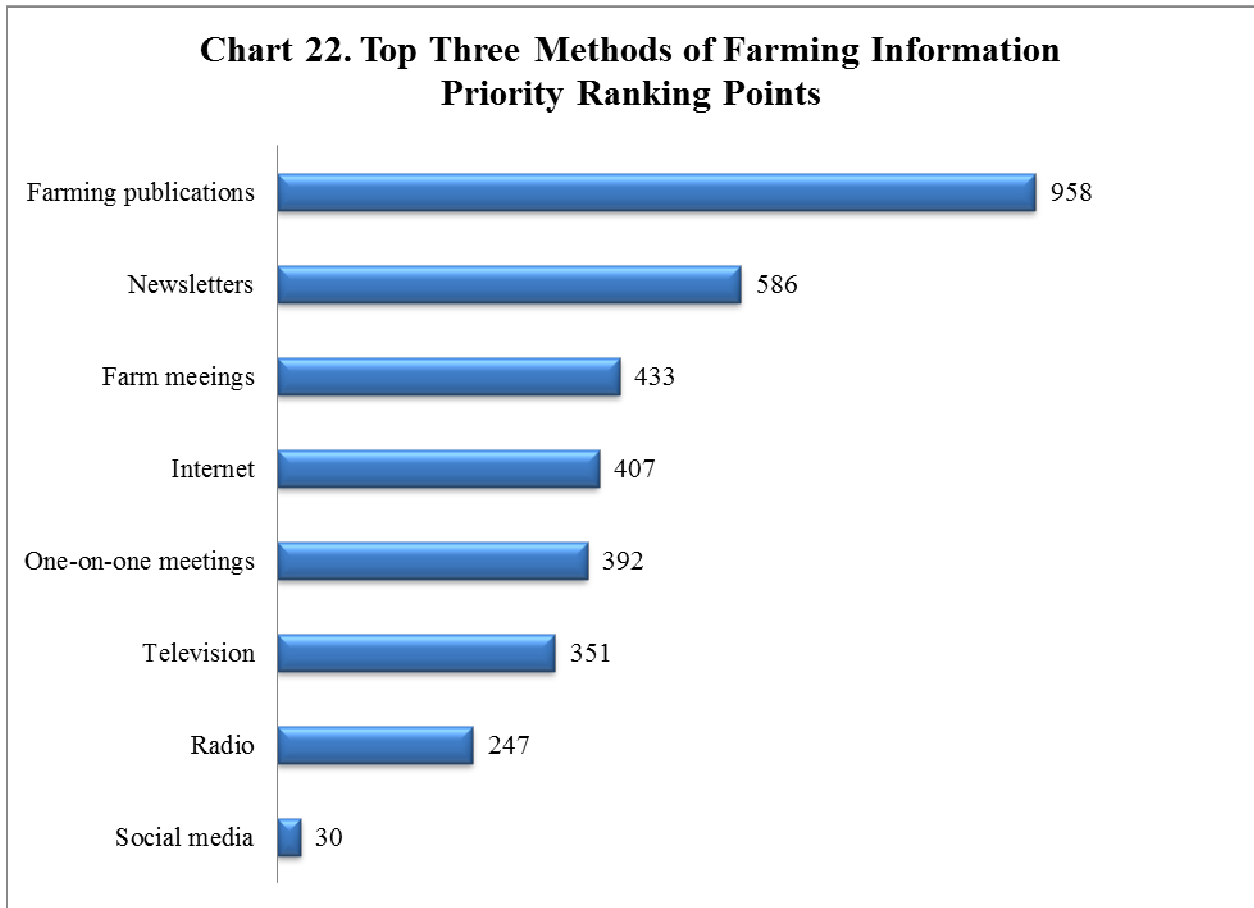
Although large majorities regardless of the size of their landholdings agreed or strongly agreed that farmers should face negative consequences for failure to follow conservation guidelines, a higher percentage of owners of 50 acres or less chose the *strongly* agree response.

Conservation Information

When asked to identify the importance of six common information sources, Chart 21 shows that the responses in the very important category were relatively small compared to the percentage of respondents who said these sources rate as important. Combining the responses in the important and very important categories show at least half of respondents said the following were important or very important: agronomy service providers, UW-Extension, farming publications, and neighbors. The perceived importance of seed companies and equipment dealers was somewhat less, with the largest percentage of respondents saying they are somewhat important or not important.



In a related question, respondents were asked to identify their top three methods for obtaining farming information. The SRC assigned three points to each respondent's top method, two points to the second highest method, and one point to the third highest method. The results are shown in Chart 22 and indicate that farming publications easily top the list. Newsletters came in a distant second, followed by farm meetings in third place. The Internet and one-on-one meetings were ranked close together in fourth and fifth place. Television and radio placed low on the rankings, and social media barely placed at all.



Conclusions

The results of this survey indicate that Trempealeau County farmland owners have a substantial conservation ethic with respect to farming practices as reflected by the large majorities of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with positive statements about conservation.

In addition, over three-fourths of respondents report using no till in their operation, and half include reduced till.

Among those who rent land to others or are renters themselves, no more than half of written rental contracts contain requirements to follow conservation guidelines. Trempealeau County staff may wish to consider if this merits education and outreach efforts to increase the percentage of contracts with conservation requirements.

Agronomy service providers and UW-Extension are important sources of information on cropping practices among farmers. Trempealeau County employees working on conservation programs may wish to involve agronomy service providers and UW-Extension personnel in their outreach efforts or to collaborate to effectively reach farmers with information about cropping and conservation practices.

Appendix A – Non-response Bias Test

Any survey has to be concerned with “non-response bias.” Non-response bias refers to a situation in which people who do not return a questionnaire have opinions that are systematically different from the opinions of those who return their surveys. For example, suppose most non-respondents said farming publications are not an important source of information on cropping practices, whereas most of those who returned their questionnaire said farming publications were an important source of this information. In this case, non-response bias would exist, and the raw results would overstate the importance of farming publications.

The standard way to test for non-response bias is to compare the responses of those who return the first mailing of a questionnaire to those who return the second mailing. Those who return the second questionnaire are, in effect, a sample of non-respondents (to the first mailing), and we assume that they are representative of that group. In this survey, there were 479 responses to the first mailing and 193 from the second mailing. There are 82 variables in the questionnaire, and the SRC found only four variables with statistically significant differences. Table A1 indicates that even when statistical differences exist, the magnitude of these differences is small and does not impact the interpretation of the results. **The SRC concludes that there is little evidence that non-response bias is a concern for this sample.**

Table A1 – Statistically Significant Differences Between Responses of First and Second Mailings			
Variable	Statistical Significance	First Mailing	Second Mailing
7. Number of acres rented to others for fixed cash payment	.014	59% less than 50 acres	49% less than 50 acres
11i. Percent of total land farmed in woodland	.014	13%	9%
12h. Percent with compliant forest management plan	.011	27%	17%
16. Percent who view neighbors as a very important or somewhat important source of information on cropping practices	.038	48%	54%

Appendix B – Quantitative Summary of Responses by Question

Trempealeau County Conservation Survey

LAND OWNERSHIP PATTERNS

1. How many acres do you own in Trempealeau County?

0 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	301+
4%	17%	20%	21%	10%	6%	22%

2. How many acres did you rent from other landowners in 2013?

0 ac. (go to Q7)	1 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	300+
74%	10%	5%	3%	1%	2%	1%	5%

3. How many acres of land were rented from other landowners for a fixed CASH payment in 2013?

0 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	301+
70%	10%	5%	2%	2%	2%	8%

4. How many acres of land were rented from other landowners under some other arrangement (flexible cash payment, crop share, combination of cash and share)?

0 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	301+
96%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%

5. From how many landowners did you rent land in 2013? **Average: 3.8**

	Yes	No (go to Q6)
a. Did any of your 2013 rentals from others include a written contract?	34%	66%
i. If yes, how many rentals had a written contract? Average: 4.1		
b. Did any of your written contracts in 2013 include requirements to follow conservation practices?	42%	58%

6. How many acres did you rent to others in 2013?

0 ac. (go to Q12)	1 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	300+
54%	14%	18%	7%	2%	2%	2%	2%

7. How many acres of land did you rent to others for a fixed cash payment in 2013?

0 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	301+
56%	24%	11%	4%	2%	1%	2%

8. How many acres of land did you rent to others under some other arrangement (flexible cash payment, crop share, combination of cash and share)?

0 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 150	151 – 200	201 – 250	251 – 300	301+
95%	3%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%

9. <u>To</u> how many other landowners did you rent in 2013	Average: 1.3		
		Yes	No (go to Q10)
a. Did any of your rentals <u>to others</u> in 2013 include a written contract?		41%	59%
i. If yes, how many rentals had a written contract?	Average: 1.7		
b. Did any of your rental contracts <u>to others</u> in 2013 include requirements to follow conservation practices?		49%	51%
		Yes	No
10. Is any of the acreage you cropped (owned or rented) adjacent to a water body (stream, intermittent stream, wetland, drainage ditch, or lake)?		55%	45%

CROPPING

11. What percentage of land owned and rented do you have in the following crops/uses in 2013 (total=100%)?

a. Soybeans	14%	f. Idle cropland	3%
b. Corn	33%	g. Fruits, green- house, or nursery crops	0.4%
c. Small grains	2%	h. Permanent pasture	8%
d. Hay	16%	i. Woodland (NOT fruit production)	15%
e. In conservation practices (field borders, buffers, grassed waterways), but not cropped)	4%	j. Non-agricultural uses (<i>such as dwellings, buildings, structures, roads, and wasteland not in a conservation practice</i>)	4%

12. Do you have a written plan for your acres compliant with the following programs?

Conservation Plan Type	Yes	No
a. Conservation Security Program (CSP)	14%	86%
b. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)	26%	74%
c. Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) Plan	8%	92%
d. Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) Plan	9%	91%
e. Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) Plan	2%	98%
f. Nutrient Management Plan or Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan	15%	85%
g. Farmland Preservation Plan	20%	90%
h. Forest management plan	25%	75%
i. Wildlife management plan	6%	94%
j. Other state plan, specify _____	2%	98%
k. Other county plan, specify _____	2%	98%

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

13. Which of the following conservation practices you employ?							Yes	No
a. Terraces?							13%	87%
b. Stream side forest buffer?							17%	83% (if no, go to 13c)
	< 10 ft	10 to 19 ft	20 to 29 ft	30 to 39 ft	40 to 49 ft	50+ feet		
→ Width of buffer in feet	10%	40%	17%	8%	2%	24%		
→ Species used for stream side forest buffer			Evergreen	Deciduous	Mixed			
			3%	23%	74%			
							Yes	No
c. Stream side grass buffer?							27%	73% (if no, go to 13d)
Is the buffer maintained (mowed, fertilized)?							30%	70%
What is the stream side grass buffer primarily designed to do?								
→ Capture sediment				71%	29%			
→ Capture nutrients				62%	38%			
→ Capture pesticide residue				50%	50%			
→ Provide wildlife habitat				70%	30%			
	<10 ft.	10 to 19 ft	20 to 29 ft	30 to 39 ft	40 to 49 ft	50+ ft		
→ Width of buffer in feet	12%	27%	18%	9%	6%	29%		
							Yes	No
d. Field border?							20%	80%
42%							58%	42%
What is the field border primarily designed to do?								
→ Capture sediment				67%	33%			
→ Capture nutrients				62%	38%			
→ Capture pesticide residue				50%	50%			
→ Provide wildlife habitat				80%	20%			
	< 10 ft	10 to 19 ft	20 to 29 ft	30 to 39 ft	40 to 49 ft	50+ ft		
→ Width of border in feet	34%	33%	9%	8%	4%	11%		
							Yes	No
e. Filter strip?							19%	81% (if no, go to 14)
→ Is the filter strip maintained (mowed, fertilized)							60%	40%
What is the filter strip primarily designed to do?								
→ Capture sediment				81%	19%			
→ Capture nutrients				69%	31%			
→ Capture pesticide residue				53%	47%			
→ Provide wildlife habitat				64%	36%			
	< 10 ft	10 to 19 ft	20 to 29 ft	30 to 39 ft	40 to 49 ft	50+ ft		
→ Width of filter strip in feet	14%	34%	20%	7%	4%	20%		

TILLAGE SYSTEMS

14. Which of the following tillage systems do you use in your operation?	Yes	No
a. Conventional: A full width tillage system that leaves 0-15% residue after planting.	32%	68%
b. Reduced Till: A full width tillage system that leaves 16-30% residue after planting.	51%	49%
c. Mulch Till: A full width tillage system that leaves greater than 30% residue after planting.	33%	67%
d. No-Till: Planting or drilling is accomplished in a narrow seedbed or slot created by coulters, row cleaners, or disc openers. Crop residue greater than 30% remains after planting.	77%	23%
e. Vertical tillage – for example Turbo Till	24%	76%

CONSERVATION OPINIONS

15. Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. Conservation is an important part of my farming practices.	2%	1%	48%	49%
b. Installing conservation practices is cost-effective (the benefits equal or exceed the costs incurred).	2%	10%	63%	25%
c. Maintaining conservation practices is cost-effective.	2%	10%	67%	22%
d. Farmers have a responsibility to protect the soil.	1%	1%	45%	53%
e. Farmers should receive cash incentives to participate in conservation programs.	5%	17%	49%	29%
f. Farmers should face negative consequences if they do not follow conservation guidelines.	8%	23%	47%	22%

CONSERVATION INFORMATION

16. How important is each of the following as a source of information on cropping practices for your farm?

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
a. Seed Companies	28%	30%	35%	7%
b. Agronomy Service Providers	17%	24%	44%	16%
c. Equipment Dealers	35%	34%	27%	4%
d. Neighbors	16%	34%	41%	10%
e. Farming Publications	13%	29%	46%	12%
f. UW-Extension	15%	30%	43%	13%

17. From the list below, please rank your top three methods of getting up-to-date farming information

	Most Important	2 nd Most Important	3 rd Most Important
Internet	14%	10%	10%
Radio	7%	7%	9%
Farming Publications	35%	22%	17%
Television	7%	14%	13%
Farm Meetings	11%	15%	14%
Newsletters	13%	21%	23%
One-on-One Meetings	12%	11%	11%
Social Media	1%	0%	2%