


A Closer Look: **Iowa Farmland Ownership and Water Quality**

Nearly 75% of Iowa's landscape is farmland. This rich, fertile soil has helped Iowa become an agricultural leader in corn, soybeans, eggs and pork production. However, soil amendments that boost production and livestock waste contribute to water quality challenges when nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus leave the farmland.

Land management and conservation practices utilized by farmers and landowners play a key role in improving water quality by reducing loss of nutrients to waterways. So, who owns Iowa's farmland, and who influences land management decisions?

53% 

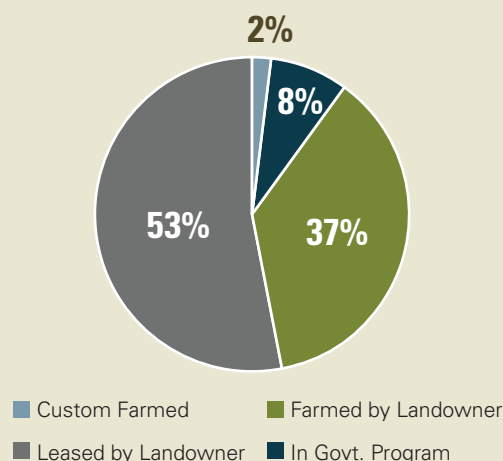
**Non-Farming Landowners
via Lease Agreements**

37% 

Farming Landowners

10% Other (see right)

Iowa Farmland Ownership



Custom Farmed:

An alternative to leasing farmland, the custom operator agrees to perform all the machine operations on the land in exchange for a set fee. The landowner pays for all seed, chemicals, and other inputs, and keeps all of the crop and commodity payments.

Government Programs:

Through the Federal Farm Bill, landowners receive an annual payment to seed land to perennial vegetation to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and encourage wildlife habitat. Example: Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Applying Best Practices Regardless of Ownership

When land is leased to a tenant for agricultural production, land management decisions, like the amount of tillage and use of conservation practices, are determined by the lease agreement.

Factors influencing lease terms include family relations, agricultural production knowledge, and tradition, all of which can present challenges to discussing and implementing conservation practices. Additionally, the majority of land is rented through short-term leases, limiting the willingness of many tenants to invest in conservation practices with long-term benefits, like cover crops.

Land Ownership Trending Away From Active Farmers

The majority of leased land in Iowa is owned by someone who does not currently farm. While many of those landowners are retired farmers, a growing number have never farmed. Landowners with farming experience use conservation practices more consistently than those who never farmed and adoption is lowest on land owned by non-Iowa residents.

Improving Land Productivity and Water Quality Go Hand in Hand

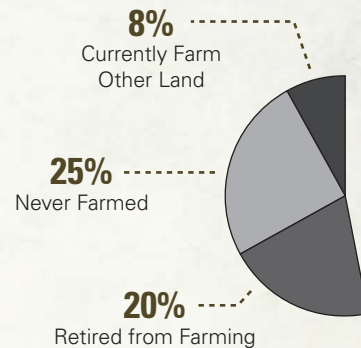
The Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy is focused on reducing nutrients in Iowa waters. Farmers, landowners, cities, agencies and everyday Iowans are collaborating to make changes to help meet nutrient reduction goals.

Conservation not only protects the long-term productivity of the land, but also improves water quality locally and beyond. Every conservation practice will not work on every acre, but every acre can benefit from conservation practices that best fit the soil, cropping system, and location on the landscape.

Getting Started

Discussing a new conservation practice with a tenant or landlord can be challenging. For talking points and relevant research findings to help begin the conversation, visit: www.iowalearningfarms.org/talking-your-tenant

Landowner Demographics of Leased Farmland



About 9% of Iowa's leased farmland is owned by someone who does not reside in Iowa.

For information about adding conservation practices to leases:



Lease Supplement from Iowa State Ag Decision Maker:

www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c2-08.html



Incorporating Conservation Practices Into Your Farm Lease (March 17, 2021 Webinar):

www.iowalearningfarms.org/page/webinars



Farmers and landowners can learn about practices with the **Whole Farm Conservation Best Practices Manual** available from Iowa Learning Farms: <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/1582>

**It's the only water the earth has. It's everyone's job to keep it clean.
We all have ownership in the future, no matter of who owns the land.**



This publication was produced by the Conservation Learning Group and is based upon Sawadgo, W., W. Zhang, and A. Plastina, 2021, What Drives Landowners' Conservation Decisions? Evidence from Iowa. Accepted at Journal of Soil and Water Conservation.

Credit: NRCS/SWCS photo by Lynn Betts