

**Professional Development for the Adoption of
Sustainable Agriculture on Rented Land**

Final Research Report
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Executive Summary

According to the 1997 census of agriculture, approximately half of the cropland in Iowa is farmed by someone other than the landowner. The nature of the land rental arrangement varies widely, but anecdotal evidence and interviews of farmers, landowners, and Extension and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff indicate that rented land often presents additional barriers to the adoption of sustainable agriculture. The focus of this project has been to work with renters, landowners, and agricultural agency professionals to document in greater detail how the rental relationship affects adoption of sustainable agricultural practices and to determine what tools and techniques could help facilitate communication about the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices on rented land. Information has been obtained through the utilization of focus groups, personal interviews, participant observation techniques, and secondary data. This report represents the culmination of twelve months of research to better understand tenant-landlord relations, and how those relations affect the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices on rented land.

The bullets below summarize some of the themes that emerged during the aforementioned information gathering process.

- While the definition of sustainable agriculture varied greatly among respondents, there was a distinct difference between the type of definition that was given by agriculture professionals and landlord and tenants who expressed little interest in the adoption of sustainable agricultural methods, and that given by landlord and tenants who expressed interest in the adoption of sustainable farming techniques. Specifically, the former defined sustainable agriculture in terms “practices,” while the latter described sustainable agriculture in terms of “processes.”
- There appears to be a practice of self-censorship, or conflict avoidance, among tenants. Tenants appear to be apprehensive to discuss the possible adoption of sustainable practices with their landlord for fear of “rocking the boat” and thus jeopardizing their future status as tenants.
- The uncertainty that exists in one-year leasing arrangements strongly inhibits a tenant’s ability, and willingness, to adopt sustainable practices on rented land.
- Extension personal are perceived as lacking the technical knowledge needed to make them viable sources of information for issues which pertain to sustainable and organic agriculture.
- Respondents (including tenants, landlords, and some Extension staff) perceived Extension as being too oriented towards issues of production at the expense of profitability, which further damages their credibility as leaders in the sustainable agricultural movement.

- Both landlords and tenants see sustainable agriculture and organic agriculture as requiring a level of technical knowledge greater than that required in a more conventional operation. Consequently, landlords and tenants repeatedly expressed a desire to gain access to such information so as to educate themselves about alternative farming methods, and to concomitantly educate their landlord (or tenant) about such practices.
- Tenants, in particular, requested access to information that compares the profitability of conventional practices to sustainable practices. They asked for this information to be able to show their landlords the profitability of sustainable and organic agriculture, and thus combat the myth that sustainable and organic agriculture are not profitable endeavors.
- Extension needs to do a better job at disseminating information (for instance, the supplemental lease agreement development by economist Dr. Mike Duffy was not mentioned once during any of the interviews).
- Cash rent appeared to be the dominant leasing arrangement, yet most respondents viewed it as being hostile toward the adoption of sustainable methods due to its concentration of risk upon the tenant.
- Iowa State University appears to have a slight image problem for some members within the sustainable agriculture movement due to the perception that Extension emphasizes production rather than profitability or sustainability.
- Many female landlords described inequitable power relations between themselves and male tenants. Namely, they expressed feelings of exclusion, alienation, a lack of sufficient technical knowledge (with few places to go attain such knowledge), and a desire to form networks with other female landlords.
- There are still strong social constraints in rural Iowa that equate a weedy field to a bad farmer.
- Respondents expressed a desire for Extension to become more proactive in their promotion of sustainable agriculture (this could also improve the image that some expressed towards Iowa State as being a pawn to agri-business). For instance, much of the information that was requested by those interviewed is already available through Extension, except it is obviously not getting out to those who need it.
- All respondents spoke positively toward sustainable and organic agriculture. Factors which kept more from adopting the practices, however, were concerns over its profitability and a lack of technical knowledge to make such practices work (as well as a perceived lack of technical knowledge on the part of Extension). If this is indeed the case, a more proactive role on the part of Extension to educate interested farmers could result in an increase in use of sustainable methods.

Utilizing these findings, the research team will now engage in the education design portion of this project. This will involve several different components, from three in-depth pilot projects with small groups to the development and dissemination of informational material to be used by agricultural agency professionals throughout the state. (The approach and products are consistent with Iowa's Sustainable Agriculture Strategic Plan, which calls for involving farmers, working with partners [i.e., Extension, NRCS, Practical Farmers of Iowa], and offering a range of opportunities for training.)

Judging by the responses given to this project by landlords, tenants, and agriculture professionals, we have indeed tapped into an issue that is of great concern for many involved in Iowa agriculture. Consistently throughout the interviews participants remarked about the "timeliness" and "great significance" of this research. One member of Extension in fact stated, "I can't think of an issue here in Iowa that is more prudent than the issue of tenancy. Having said that, I also can't think of an issue that has been more neglected." In light of these remarks, and many others that are similar in nature and tone, we hope that future research will continue to explore the complex, multi-faceted social relationships that exist between the landlord and tenant. Indeed, not only does the future of agriculture reside in the tenant-landlord relation, but quite possibly the future of sustainable agriculture as well. As one tenant declared, "If sustainable agriculture is going to work, it's got to work first on rented land."

Introduction

According to the 1997 census of agriculture, 54 percent of all farmland in Iowa is rented (a figure only slightly up from the 53 percent recorded in the 1992 census of agriculture). Given the prominence of rented and leased land in Iowa (as well as throughout the Midwest), it is vital that current and future research begin to investigate the effect that the rental relationship has upon the social, environmental, and economic spheres of rural life within the United States. This research project serves as a first step toward that research agenda by examining the social dynamics between landlords, tenants, and agricultural agency professionals in order to better understand how those dynamics affect the adoption of sustainable agricultural methods on rented land.

There is widespread anecdotal evidence that rented land poses special challenges for the adoption of sustainable agriculture in Iowa and elsewhere in the Midwest. Sustainable techniques of production, such as conservation and organic methods, require long-term investments in management and sometimes equipment. The instability of tenure inherent in rental arrangements, communication issues, and conflicting goals for the land may lead to difficulties in adoption even when one or both parties in the landlord-farmer relationship wishes to implement sustainable techniques of production. Given the extent of rented land, real progress towards a sustainable agriculture requires addressing the challenges posed by land rental. As yet, however, little research or professional development has been conducted on this issue. The published research in this area is targeted on specialized features of the topic and does not as yet provide the kind of holistic and in-depth understanding that is necessary to design effective training and professional development.

Most of the research does support the anecdotal evidence, however. For example, some Iowa landlords report a feeling of awkwardness in advising tenants and renters to use more sustainable techniques, because they do not want to appear dictatorial or ignorant in advising farmers about how to do their work. In line with this, both Gilbert and Beckley (1993) and Constance et al. (1996) found that landlords and tenants agree overwhelmingly that tenants make most of the decisions with regard to farm operations, including soil conservation, pesticide use, and water quality practices. Some female landowners we have worked with say that there are special communication barriers in cross-gender relationships between landowners and farmers, given the common cultural assumption that “farming is man’s work.” In line with this, Rogers and Vandeman (1993: 566) report that “women farm landlords are *less* likely than men landlords to participate in farm management decisions with direct environmental implications” [emphasis in the original].

Additionally, several factors seem to promote a more short-term, bottom-line approach to farming on rented land. Intense competition in some countries for land base leads to narrow profit margins as farmers compete with each other to offer the highest rents, particularly in cash-rent situations. The increasing trend toward cash-rent in Iowa and elsewhere may be accelerating this tendency.¹ For example, cash-rent is usually associated with greater turn-over among the farmers (Pieper and Harl 2000), mitigating against long-term management investments and the formation of good communication ties between landlords and tenants. Also, the pressure for increased land base, combined with intense competition for rented land is leading to a situation where an increasing number of farmers are working widely scattered fields, 20, 30, or even more miles apart. As travel times increase, farmers may feel pressure to adopt low-management and less sustainable methods.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that landlords typically regard their land with a narrowly economic lens. The intense competition for land base gives landlords an opportunity to ask for higher rents, and some renters report suspicions that some landlords take pride in getting the highest prices that they can. As well, the advanced age of many landowners may lead some to regard their land primarily as a pension fund, with lower concern for the future of the land beyond their own life span. Here again there is some empirical support. Constance et al. (1996:577) found that what little participation landlords have in farm decision making in Missouri is “predominately based on economic, rather than social or environmental, factors.”

Other research, however, appears to contradict the common anecdotal perception that sustainable farmers sometimes have trouble convincing landlords to allow sustainable practices. Constance et al. (1996), Gilbert and Beckley (1993), and Salamon (1992) all report that renters are largely in control of farm management and that the trend is toward what Gilbert and Beckley call a “dominant tenant-subordinate landlord” model. Yet

¹ According to Pieper and Harl (2000), the percentage of cash-rent leasing arrangements in Iowa (out of all forms of leasing arrangements) has increased from 48.8 percent in 1982, to 54.2 percent in 1992, to 57.1 percent in 1997, while crop share arrangements in Iowa have decreased from 48.8 percent in 1982, to 44 percent in 1992, to 38.8 percent in 1997.

sustainable producers—both anecdotally and from information gathered from our research—overwhelmingly report that landlords want a “neat and tidy” appearance to the land, and tenants are therefore wary of reducing pesticide use through banding or other techniques that they believe might result in an appearance of weediness.² Many landowners are far removed from the land, making communication with the producer and with Extension and NRCS staff more challenging. In other cases, landlords who are themselves retired farmers may be suspicious of alternative approaches to farming that threaten long-held ideas. The relative invisibility of sustainable agricultural benefits—it is hard to “see” lower rates of soil and nutrient loss, improved soil structure, higher levels of beneficial soil micro-organisms, and the like—means that the improvements sustainable management makes to the land may not be readily apparent to the landlord. These factors may help account for why sustainable producers often report feeling constrained to farm more conventionally than they would like on their rented land, despite the relative autonomy reportedly granted to tenants in farm operation decision-making.

Since slightly over fifty percent of agricultural land in Iowa, like other Midwest states, is rented, these issues are vital to the promotion of sustainable agriculture. Our goal through this project has thus been to investigate these issues to support professional development training on landlord-renter relations and their relevance to sustainability. We have utilized a participatory qualitative approach that allows for a more holistic and in-depth analysis than in previous quantitative approaches.

Approach and Methods

The general approach followed in the information gathering stage of this project has been “bottom-up,” stressing the importance of indigenous knowledge of landlord-tenant relations and the challenges faced by agricultural agency professionals. Utilizing participatory qualitative methodology, landowners, tenants, and agricultural agency professionals—i.e., county, regional and state level ISU Extension agents and Natural Resource Conservation Services staff—have been interviewed through both one-on-one situations and in focus groups. These interviews were supplemented with participant observations and supported with an extensive literature review. We employed a snowball sampling technique to identify potential participants for both the focus groups and personal interviews. Given the ties between the research team and ISU County Extension agents and the Practical Farmer of Iowa, the initial snowball sample emanated from these key agents, extending outward toward the creation of further “snowballs” and, thus, a more diverse sampling pool. The focus group meetings and personal interviews were tape-recorded. In addition, the interviewer took field notes, and the tapes were transcribed and analyzed.

² A recent national Gallup Poll of large farmers and ranchers indicated when asked about adoption of sustainable agricultural practices, 17% cited “landlord won't allow” as a reason for not adopting sustainable agriculture methods.

Several informal personal interviews were conducted at the beginning of the information gathering process with key informants from across the state of Iowa. These conversations helped to direct the focus of, develop questions for, and provide some empirical background for the focus groups that were to follow. These interviews were not tape-recorded nor were they “formal interviews” per se—the direction of conversation was not guided by a questionnaire. Rather, the respondents helped guide the conversation. This form of interviewing is best at the beginning of a research project to help the researcher “see” what the empirical problem is from the eyes of those “on the ground,” thus allowing us to utilize indigenous knowledge from the start to guide the project. Between July and September of 2000, 29 interviews of this sort were conducted (with 3 farm managers, 8 Extension field specialists and county directors, 2 employees of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 3 NRCS district conservationists, 7 tenants, and 6 landlords).³

The next stage of the research consisted of four focus group meetings—one involving tenants, one involving landlords, and two involving agriculture professionals. Each focus group lasted between 1 and 2 hours, and was tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The focus groups served to further direct the focus of, and construct questions for, the individual personal interviews that were to follow. In addition, discussion among a larger group of people can yield different information than one-on-one interviews. In the final stage of information gathering, and to supply us with as much contextual information as possible, we conducted personal interviews within a single county. We chose to focus primarily on grain farmers both because grain production dominates Iowa agriculture and also because of the higher tenancy rate among cash-grain operators. (For instance, in the cash-grain county of Hardin, where less than one percent of farms were engaged in dairy production, approximately 68 percent of the land is rented. In Clayton, on the other hand, where slightly over 25 percent of farms were engaged in dairy production, 32 percent of the land is reported as being rented.)

We ultimately selected Audubon County for a number of reasons.⁴ First, Audubon is largely a grain producing county (fewer than one percent of farms are engaged in dairy production). Additionally, with a significant land rental base, competition for rented land is a major issue in the county (slightly less than 50 percent of the land is rented). Finally, there is the issue of entree. Members of our research team were acquainted with a number of individuals in Audubon County who served as a base from which we “snowballed” out to gain access to the wider community. As of July 2001, twenty-eight people have been interviewed within this stage of the project—13 tenants, 12 landlords (six tenant-landlord pairs), and 3 Extension agents located either within Audubon county or its neighboring county to the south (Cass county).⁵ Twenty-four interviews were tape-

³ Professional farm managers manage 5.1 percent, or 1.1615 million acres, of Iowa farmland. This accounts for approximately 9 percent of leased land in Iowa being managed by a farm manager. Additionally, 51.2 percent of all leasing methods in 1997 involving farm managers were a cash-rent arrangement, whereas 35 percent were crop-share arrangements (see Pieper and Harl 2000: 25).

⁴ See appendix for informational tables that illustrate various leasing trends for the state as well as for Audubon County.

⁵ Note: approximately 1/3 of all participants were women (this includes all three stages of the information gather process—scattered personal interviews, focus groups, and the county case study).

recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. In the remaining four interviews, respondents wished not to have their interviews tape-recorded. In these instances, extensive notes were taken both during and after the interview process. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours.

Specific information objectives include the following:

- How does the rented land relationship affect adoption of sustainable practice where either landowner or renter is interested in sustainable agriculture?
- Identify cases where sustainable practices have been successfully adopted on rented land and analyze what approaches and factors led to the negotiation of the rental relationship to accommodate such practices.
- How can agricultural professionals best help? As technical information providers? As facilitators? How might they reach landowners who are not familiar with the agricultural agencies? What types of leases are used? Are ISU Extension's publications, including the sample lease and lease supplement, helpful in promoting discussion about these issues?
- What special factors such as gender relations do agricultural agency professionals need to be aware of and sensitive to in working with rented land situations?

Findings

How was sustainable agriculture defined?

While the definition of sustainable agriculture varied greatly among respondents, there was a distinct difference between the type of definition that was given by agriculture professionals and landlords and tenants who expressed little interest in the adoption of sustainable agricultural methods, and that given by landlords and tenants who expressed interest in the adoption of sustainable farming techniques; specifically, the former defined sustainable agriculture in terms "practices," while the latter described a broader vision sustainable agriculture in terms of "processes."

The following quotes provide examples of those who articulated a definition of sustainable agriculture as not just about what practices are utilized, but to construct a model of agricultural production that preserves the small family farm, rural communities, and the environment.

"Well, to me, it [sustainable agriculture] is about being able to preserve the land so that it's gonna be there, you know, forever. And that it also preserves the farmer so that he is able to, to make a livin' in that business."--landlord

"Sustainable agriculture is of course about first being able to sustain the livelihood of one's farm. But equally, and this is oftentimes forgotten, it also has to be about

sustaining the environment, about sustaining communities, and about sustaining the small family farmer. Basically, it's about sustaining the rural way of life.”--tenant

“It's [sustainable agriculture] farming with a system that improves the ground slightly and also improves the people. And, uh, it's a way that you're also a good neighbor.”--tenant

*“It's [sustainable agriculture] got to be understood first as a process, you know? This is where we [ISU Extension] get off track. We think of sustainable agriculture, and immediately we think of practices to reduce chemical application, or soil erosion. Not that that's a bad thing, it's a great way to start thinking about it, but only to **start** thinking about it. You know, if you have filter-strips and stuff like that, and you don't have much soil loss or chemical runoff, you could therefore be said to run a sustainable operation. But now say you're producing corn and losing your hind-end because of low market prices, are you still farming sustainably? If you end up going out of business and losing the farm and have to move to out of the community? You suffer, the community suffers. Now really, is **that** really very sustainable? Sustainable for who?”—Extension staff*

On the other hand, agriculture professionals and those uninterested in the adoption of sustainable agricultural techniques on their land, or the land they are renting, expressed narrower definitions of sustainable agriculture—specifically conceptualizing sustainable agriculture in terms of practices.

“I guess when I hear that term [sustainable agriculture] I immediately think of practices that one uses to preserve or sustain the resources that exist on one's farm. So, well, filler strips, or buffer strips, terraces, things like that to preserve his soil and protect his water supply from chemical run-off. So that he can, you know, farm without resorting to heavy chemical applications.”—landlord

“It's the application of technology to solve our environmental problems. So, for example, the use of computers and satellites to engage in what's been termed 'precision farming.' Getting the biggest bang, with the fewest amount of chemicals.”—Extension staff

“That's a hard question. I guess I would just have to say utilizing certain managerial practices to limit resource depletion.”—tenant

Definitions of sustainable agriculture were also similar between landlords and tenants where sustainable farming techniques were adopted. Conversely, however, variations in definitions between tenants and landlords tended to become more obvious in those instances where sustainable agriculture was not adopted, even though one (tenant or landlord) was interested in adopting such practices.

In those few cases where sustainable techniques were adopted, the shared definition between landlord and tenant were not always shared, but this changed over time with increased communication and education.

“I have to admit, at first I really didn’t know what organic agriculture was. I thought it was just something that those ‘other’ people did. You know, something hippies or something did. And I sure as heck didn’t think you could make a living doing it. But then [my son] said he wanted to farm that way so I thought I better find out exactly what it was about. He was really helpful at taking the time to educate me better about what it was. Otherwise I would probably feel the same way about it today.”—landlord

“My parents were skeptical at first when I told them about wanting to farm without chemicals. But I think part of it was just that they had this idea that this is the type of people that farm organically, you know, there was a stigma attached to organic farmers, and there still is. But after we sat down and talked about it, and took ‘em to that organic farm, they started to change their view toward it.”--tenant

How does the rented land relationship affect adoption of sustainable practices where either the landowner or renter is interested in sustainable agriculture?

In 7 of the 13 interviews with renters, tenants described an unwillingness or inability to freely express a desire to landlords to adopt more sustainable farming practices. This practice of self-censorship, or conflict avoidance, was undertaken largely due to a fear of “rocking the boat.” Given the high competition in Iowa for farmland, many tenants fear upsetting their landlords with talk of the adoption of alternative farming practices.

“No, I haven’t really talked to him about it [referring to sustainable farming practices]. I mean I’d like to cut back on my nitrogen application, especially given the high price of anhydrous, and on how much pesticide and herbicide I apply, but I know how my landlord likes his fields to look.”—tenant

“We talked a little bit about things like ridge till and cutting back on how many chemicals I applied in one of our first meetings. I guess he thought I was trying to get at something because he immediately asked, ‘you’re not one of those organic farmers are you?’ and he didn’t mean it as a compliment. Right there I knew that I better just do what he wanted if we were going to make this relationship work.”—tenant

“I guess I’ve never talked to him [the landlord] about sustainable ag. because I know what his answer would be.”—tenant

I think you’ll find that my landlord probably thinks sustainable ag and organic ag. are good things, just as long as they’re done on someone else’s farm. Let’s just say I know what battles I can win and which ones I can’t”—tenant

“I really don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to keep this land. I know someone last year offered him [the landlord] ten dollars more an acre than I’m paying. He didn’t take it but that’s not to say that he won’t take the next offer that comes along. I really can’t afford to pay any more. I really can’t even afford to pay what I’m currently paying, but I

really can't afford to pay any more an acre. So I just try to stay on his good side and be a good tenant and hope for the best."—tenant

The uncertainty of the rental arrangement also appeared to have a significant effect on whether or not sustainable practices are adopted.

"Well, about ten years ago I started farming a neighboring piece of ground from a retired farmer. And it was quite a lengthy negotiation process for him to agree to rent to us. And I knew that he had received offers for higher than what I felt we could afford to pay, so I listed a number of things that I would do. And those, I think, are things that persuaded him to rent to us at a lower price. And I said that I wouldn't do any chisel-plowing and that I would protect and enhance the water base that he's established....And I would go out and help to reshape his waterways, and he'd come out and work with me on that. A lot of 'em were pretty old and they were silting in. They really needed to be completely re-ditched, but we just worked on 'em the best that we could. And so we did that for a period of about nine years and last fall with the low prices I gave him an offer for rent and it simply wasn't high enough. And so he didn't rent to us any more. So it's kind of -- there are mixed feelings about those efforts and conservation. I mean, you know, on the one hand I can say that it worked pretty well for nine years, that we did farm his land at below average rental rates and in return he would receive a lot of benefit from it. But looking back I can't say I would do it all again. It was a lot of work. I did all of the work, built his dirt back up and he's the one benefiting from it."—tenant

"I'd have to say one of the biggest barriers, if not the biggest barriers, to adopting sustainable practices is the contract. I don't know anyone that has a multi-year contract. And with the unpredictability of the commodities and land, I can't imagine any landlord agreeing to a multi-year contract. But then, from the standpoint of the tenant, I'm not going to want to put in hundreds of hours of sweat-equity into soil that I may not have next year. Why should I as a tenant build up the soil fertility of land that is not even mine just so he can rent it to someone else for more than I am paying and so that person can benefit by having richer dirt? I don't think any rational person would be foolish enough to really build-up dirt that's not even his."—tenant

"Without question a multi-year leasing arrangement is better than the year arrangements that most people have [talking with regard to which is most conducive to sustainable agriculture]."—tenant

In addition, most respondents state that a crop-share arrangement is more favorable to the adoption of sustainable practices than the conventional cash-rent arrangement.⁶

"Well, I'd definitely have to say that I would think a crop-share arrangement would be better for the adoption of sustainable farming than cash-rent. In a crop-share, the tenant would be able to share the risk, and it would maybe cause him to be a bit of an innovator."

⁶ According to the census of agriculture, 45.1 percent of all farms in Audubon County reported revenue through cash-rent leasing arrangements in 1997 (See Table 11 in Appendix).

You know, trying something new, in the hopes of hitting something big. Bigger at least than the measly profits from corn and beans.”—tenant

“You would maybe think that sustainable farming and organic ag. would be more likely to be tried in a cash-rent situation because in that situation you would think that as long as the landlord’s getting his 155 [dollars] an acre, or whatever, he wouldn’t care what his tenant does, cause he’ll get paid regardless. But landlords typically like to keep tenants, at least good tenants, and as a landlord I don’t want my tenant trying weird risky things that may cause him not to be my tenant anymore.”—landlord

“Sustainable agriculture, and organic agriculture for that matter, needs to be a team effort involving both the landlord and tenant. If both parties are not involved it’s not going to work. That’s why I think it could only really work in a crop-share arrangement. Cash rent situations are too antagonistic or oppositional, I think the landlord needs to be involved for it to work. Otherwise, you’re going to get those situations where the tenant does all the work, builds up the soil, and then the landlord takes it out from under him and rents it to someone else for ten or twenty dollars more an acre, and to someone that doesn’t give a crap about farming sustainably.”—tenant

“I guess I’d have to say crop-share [provides more favorable conditions for the adoption of sustainable farming practices]. The question then becomes, how do you get a landlord to want to go crop-share instead of cash-rent. That’s the problem.”—tenant

What approaches and factors lead to the negotiation of rental relationships that accommodate sustainable practices?

In only 2 of the 19 rental situations we encountered in the county interviews (13 tenants and 12 landlords interviewed, 6 of which were tenant-landlord pairs) had sustainable practices been adopted. Moreover, in both cases the land was being rented from a relative (in one case from the father and in the other case from an aunt).⁷ *This dearth of “success stories” for sustainable agriculture on rented land is striking, given the relatively large number of sustainable farmers in Audubon County and the high percentage of rented land. Yet while this finding is disappointing, we can still be able to look closely at those instances where, for instance, the tenant utilized sustainable methods on the land he owned, but farmed more conventionally on the land he rented.*

In one case, the tenant was planning on devoting 20 percent of his land to organic beans, yet when asked if any of his rented land would be put in organic beans he replied:

“I could tell that he [the landlord] was not too happy with me putting his land in hay and oats. I know what his answer would be if I approached him about putting it in organic beans. Let’s just say that I don’t want to have to go looking for land this fall.”

⁷ This finding is consistent with what was once mentioned by a leader of the sustainable ag. movement in Iowa when he remarked, “I don’t know anybody doing that [sustainable/organic agriculture] on non-owned land, or non-family land. So anything Iowa State could do to open landlords’ eyes would be helpful, because it’s virtually impossible to rent ground in today’s market and farm it in a sustainable manner. I mean, you just, it just can’t be done.”

This tenant has been labeled by others in the community as being “really into sustainable ag.”, and as “quite radical” in his farming practices. Yet even in this case, this tenant has been unable to persuade his landlord to allow the adoption of sustainable practices on his land. This farmer has therefore adopted two types of farming practices determined by who owns the land.

“I’ve really cut back on how much I apply to the land I own, I’d just a soon see a few more weeds in my field. You know, as they say, “weeds in the field means worms in the ground.” You got no weeds, you got no worms. Most people can’t even see that one simple thing. You’re just killing your dirt when you over apply chemicals. But then there’s the land I rent. Now I admit, I farm pretty conventionally on that. My landlord is still of the mindset that rows need to be clean. So I give him what he wants. If I don’t, someone else will.”

The landlord, though claiming to view sustainable agriculture in a positive light, was most concerned with profitability and did not see sustainable agriculture outperforming conventional methods in this respect.⁸

“I’m just concerned with weed pressure on crops. I’m not really concerned about weed free fields because they look good, but because of the weed pressure. When you back off on your chemical application, you’re going to have weeds, and those weeds put a lot of pressure, put a lot of stress on your crop. And of course that’ll affect your yields, which affects your profit margins. I just don’t know how you can farm profitably without adequate weed control.”

This dynamic—tenant wishes to farm sustainably but fails to push the subject for fear of losing the land—was frequently encountered in the interviews. In fact, in the majority of cases, tenants, while claiming to view sustainable agriculture positively, still admit to farming in a conventional manner. The explanation given most often did not appear to be directly related to special constraints of land rental. Seven of 13 tenants, three of 12 landlords, and two of three agriculture agency professionals, as well as a number of people during focus groups and earlier interviews, cited a lack of knowledge about the implementation and viability of sustainable practices as an important barrier to the adoption of sustainable agriculture.

“I don’t know if I could farm that way and still remain profitable”—tenant

⁸ No one interviewed actually spoken negatively about sustainable agriculture, all giving it the politically correct positive lip service. In this sense, beliefs and attitudes towards sustainable agriculture were far different than actual behaviors—while all spoke positively towards sustainable agriculture, most still farmed utilizing conventional farming practices. I should note, however, that this disjunction between attitudes and behavior could be a result of the interpersonal dynamics between researcher and respondent. Knowing that the researcher was from Iowa State, and that the research project itself concerned the adoption of sustainable practices on rented land, the respondents may have skewed some of their responses regarding sustainable agriculture to fit with what they thought the researcher wanted or expected to hear.

“We’ve become dependent on farming in a can. I really respect those guys that can farm sustainably while retaining viability. I really admire those people because they have to work their fool heads off. I just don’t know how they do it.”—NRCS staff/ landlord

“I’ve met a couple that have been farming organically for about ten years now. You want to talk about someone that knows everything about soil type and insects and you name it. They’d put our field specialist to shame. I mean, they really knew their stuff. And I see now why so few people are able to farm organically. We just don’t have the know-how. After talking to them I realized how far I had to go.”—tenant

“I think a lot of people talk as though they’re pro sustainable ag, but when it comes down to it they just don’t have the technical knowledge to make it work”—Extension staff

“Well, it’s one thing to tell them to do it [adopt sustainable practices], but I don’t care what anyone says, sustainable farming is damn hard. These sustainable and organic farmers are some of the smartest people in the world, I think. And some of the people, sadly, some of the people that know the least about sustainable ag., but who should know a lot about it, are Extension personnel. They’re from a different generation, you know, only concerned about productivity. They only know productivity. These are the people that should be out there pushing sustainable and organic ag. but they don’t know the first thing about it. We need to educate these outreach people so that they are able to outreach. And then second, they need to actually do outreach. We’re just so understaffed out here that outreach just doesn’t exist anymore. But that’s what we need to do. We need to go out and push these alternative practices and not just wait for someone to come in so we can give them a pamphlet.”—Extension staff

“The field specialist is good guy, but he just doesn’t know anything about sustainable agriculture. He’d be the last person I’d go to for information on sustainable ag. That’s what’s so disappointing. How can ISU be expected to break away from the old way of farming if its soldiers don’t know the first thing about it? Well, that’s not fair, they know some things about it. But it’s the technical information that we need, you know? And that’s beyond their reach.”—tenant

While the lack of technical know-how for sustainable practices does not stem from the rental relationship, in the current competitive rental environment tenants may be doubly reluctant to take on the higher risk of making mistakes that inevitably arises when one tries out new techniques. They may fear that a visible error will not only cost them some yield but will also destroy their reputations as good tenants—and therefore their ability to rent land in the future.

Several respondents also mentioned a desire to have a uniform implementation of practices across their entire operation as a barrier to the adoption of sustainable techniques.

“Honestly, I just don’t have the time to farm two different ways.”—tenant

“It’s a whole lot easier to farm my land the same way I farm the land I rent. It wouldn’t be cost effective if I didn’t”—tenant

These statements may be mere excuses for not farming more sustainably. On the other hand, they may indicate that the barriers to adoption of sustainable practices on rented land also impede their adoption on owned land, though a few strongly committed individuals make the extra effort to farm in two different ways.

Finally, profitability was a major concern for many respondents. Thus, agriculture professionals need to demonstrate the profitability of sustainable agriculture as well as provide technical advice on production using sustainable practices.

The two instances where sustainable methods were adopted on rented land consisted of familial tenant-landlord relationships—specifically, father/mother-as-landlords and son-as-tenant, and aunt-as-landlord and nephew-as-tenant. In both instances, landlords were skeptical of the methods to be employed but allowed them nonetheless due to perceived familial obligations.

“They were just married with a little one on the way. We just wanted to help. Didn’t think it would actually work, but we felt we needed to at least given them a chance.”—landlord

“They talked about farming organically and I was skeptical at first, but [my son] was a good worker and I knew if anyone could make it work he could.”—landlord

One case involved a tenant who was about to embark on a totally organic farming operation (in the 1970s when such a practice in Iowa was almost unheard of) with the use of his parents’ land. To help put his parents at ease about organic farming, and to help educate them about it, he brought them to a large organic operation in Wisconsin, a strategy he claims that turned out to be invaluable.

“I think one of the best things I did at the beginning was to include my parents in my idea. I really wanted to educate them about organic ag. and what I was about to embark upon. But I think the best thing I did was take them up to a large organic operation in Wisconsin. Now this was in the 70s and no one was doing this so there were few people that I could model myself on and also there were few that I could turn to for help. Now you got the Internet, but then there really wasn’t anything. Well, we took them up to Wisconsin for the day to show them around the operation and to show them that other people other than hippies and dope-smokers farmed organically. This was a very legitimate businessman that did this so it really helped legitimate my cause. Well, I know they really appreciated it, and I think it really helped my cause. I don’t know if they would have really agreed to the whole organic idea if I didn’t take the time to educate them on it.”—tenant

Additionally, however, the tenants and landlords within these familial success stories admitted that if they had rented to, or rented from, someone other than a close family member, the outcome would have been different.

“If it would have been anyone other than my son, I never would have allowed it. But, since the land was going to be his someday, I figured he could do what he wanted to it.”—landlord

“I doubt I would have let anyone else do it [farm organically on their land]. [My son] really did homework on it. I don’t think anyone else would have researched it as much as they did. He never was one to jump into anything without thinking it through”—landlord

“The only reason they let me do it [farm organically] was because I’m their son”—tenant

Although these quotes stress the importance of family relationships (and obligations) in permitting the adoption of organic agriculture on rented land, they also point to the importance of communication. The son’s decision to take his parents along to visit a successful organic farm both educated the parents/landlords and funneled some of the communication through a neutral party.

Another key factor not mentioned specifically in the quotes is the confidence of the tenants that they would be able to rent the land for a long period of time, because of the presumed familial commitment.

How can agricultural professionals best help?

It appears that the primary role of Extension in facilitating rental arrangements has been two-fold—to provide standard lease agreements, and to inform landlords and tenants of the current land rental rates for their county. Never during an interview was the lease supplement for conservation practices mentioned—including those interviews with Extension staff.

“Oh, I’ll get a few landlords coming in to ask what’s the average cash rent rates for [this] county, and a few come in to get a lease, but that’s all I really see if you’re talking strictly about the tenant-landlord relationship.”—Extension staff

“No, I would say I have little contact with people that come to me to talk to me about landlord and tenant relationships. I can’t in fact think of one instance where a landlord or tenant came to talk to me about their relationship. Well, that’s not true, other than the few that ask for rental rates I don’t see any.”—Extension staff

“The only time I come into contact with someone as a landlord or tenant is at our yearly presentation that we put on for them. But even there the only thing we talk about is what’s the rental rates looking like this year, and to tell them that they all should have

some sort of contract, cause you know about half of these guys don't have one [referring to a written lease].”—Extension staff

“Extension does a very poor job at giving landlords and tenant guidance. It's really quite pathetic.”—Extension staff

The interviews also revealed that while a wealth of information is available to the public through Extension publications, the public is unaware of much of its existence (for example, the existence of a supplemental lease agreement for conservation practices developed by Dr. Mike Duffy is unknown to not only the general farming population, but members of Extension staff as well).

“In being a landlord for thirty-two years, I don't know as I've ever gotten anything from Iowa State on what should be the best practices, or what type of leasing agreements make sense. But I would think as an Iowa Stater and an Iowa State grad, and an ag supporter in farming now for thirty-two years, I would think I would get some information—or know about it. And that has always kind of fascinated me, that there's nothing that I'm aware of. But I think Iowa State could play a more proactive role in, in getting that information out to – and obviously it's not that hard to figure out who the landlords of the land in the state of Iowa are. Every county has it very well indicated. I would encourage them to do more in that area. I would really welcome it. I don't think I've ever gotten anything. I don't think I've gotten anything on it. I think it would be useful. Because of – part of that, it would substantially enhance the tenant – tendency to do sustainable agriculture.”—landlord

“One thing that I could really use from Extension is some hard numbers to show my landlord. To show him that things like rotational grazing and organic farming can be profitable, and maybe even more profitable than conventional methods. I know that if I could show him that, with all the numbers next to each other—so he can see a side-by-side comparison—it could really help my case to help me farm more sustainable than I am.”—tenant

“Does Extension have anything that actually shows that sustainable methods can be profitable?”—tenant

“Although I think it's a good thing, I just don't see much of a future for organic ag. There just doesn't seem like there's any money to be made. Now don't get me wrong, I think it's a good thing, but not all good things are profitable, and that's what concerns me. Now if that were to change, and I was to be shown that there can be a profit made, and that there are markets for my product—that is also very important, markets—then I might be less hesitant about it.”—landlord

Additionally, a number of respondents were quite critical of Iowa State University and ISU Extension for pursuing issues of productivity while ignoring the important issue of profitability.

“And I’ll give you an example. I’d been here but just a little while and had a field day out at [a local] farm. And so we went around and we listened to the corn guy talk about maximizing corn production. And we went to the soybean guy and we listened how to maximize soybean production. And we listened to the weed guys about how to kill all the weeds. So when the field day was all done we went back havin’ refreshments and I asked the farm management guy, I said, “Well, where was your demonstration today?” “What do you mean?” “Well, we learned how to maximize production. Nobody talked about profitability out there today.” Nobody. “Oh. Well, you don’t want’a open that can o’ worms,” I was told. Well, now maybe we need to open that can of worms. You know. Who gives a rat’s rear end how many bushels you can produce if you’re goin’ broke doing it?! Is it really that much fun to drive that big equipment?”—Extension staff

“You’ve got some real good folks there at Iowa State, but some of them, it seems, have never been on a farm before. All they seem to care about is seeing just how many bushels of corn we can produce on an acre of land. But what good is that if we’re losing money on each bushel that we produce. It seems that they’ve almost completely forgot that farming needs to be first profitable, and only then should we worry about how productive we can be. Those two, profitability and productivity, are not the same thing, and someone needs to tell those folks that.”—tenant

How might agricultural professionals reach landowners who are not familiar with the agricultural agencies?

Overall, agriculture agencies need to assume a more proactive role in disseminating information to landlords and tenants. As the research revealed, this could take many forms.

“So many farmers are hooked-up to the Internet now, why doesn’t Extension have an e-mail thing where they send out mass e-mails of recent publications to farmers. Or at least send us e-mails of what exactly is out there for us. I know they have web sites for us to surf, but come on, who has time for that.”—tenant

“Something like a mass mailing would be nice. Not of everything they [Extension] publish, but maybe to just inform us of the research that is there for us. Then they could put it on the web or something for us to access if we’re interested in it. That way we don’t have to drive to the county office for it. If it’s readily available for us, I think more people would use it.”—landlord

“You know Iowa State helps fund public radio out of Ames there. And I know a lot of farmers have their radios turned to it in their barns. If you guys are interested in disseminating information about sustainable agriculture to the people, why not take advantage of that medium? It’s there for you to use. I never hear discussions on it that pertain to sustainable farming, why is that?”—NRCS staff

“Whenever I heard someone from Iowa State on the radio or TV I never heard them talk about organic or sustainable agriculture. These are people that every farmer in world

respects, and a lot of these guys out here listen to. What needs to be done is to have these guys talk, seriously talk, about sustainable agriculture. Then maybe someone will listen. I know you have some good people pushing sustainable ag. over there in Ames, but these people are not nearly as respected as say a Neil Harl. You need to get the Neil Harls in Ames to start pushing organic and sustainable ag. or otherwise you can forget about it”—tenant

The very credibility of Iowa State was also an issue for some respondents, thus reducing Iowa State’s ability to be an agricultural force and leader in the sustainable agriculture movement.

“Plus, I don’t know if you want this or not, but look at the number of counties that don’t have an agriculturalist in ‘em. And from an Extension standpoint, I think that’s a tragedy. That’s a absolute tragedy. I just think that Extension needs an agricultural presence in every county. And that presence needs to be someone who people can see and talk to other than the field specialist. I just think it does. And if we don’t, we lose great credibility. And to me, that’s what’s happened. Since ’91 we’ve lost a great deal of credibility because we don’t have anybody left. We don’t have a presence.”

[question: “From your impression from farmers, do they still think that Iowa State’s still working for them, or working for big business?”]

“If you went out and surveyed the folks, I’m guessin’ that that would come out pretty close fifty/fifty. But look at the direction that we’ve taken in the last twenty years. With the, with the research and the philosophy, if you will, of ag production.. And what’s it been? Produce, produce, produce. And to whose benefit was that? Do we have more farmers benefiting because of that? I don’t think so. So who’s benefiting here? You know. Maybe we – have we shifted onto a production mode? And who wants you to do that? Did the farm population ask for that? Or does the funding really drive it? I don’t know. And we can justify it all we want. And I know what the justification is. Dollars. And so I think agriculture, I think the university stands to be reckoned with in that regard. That’s my opinion.”—Extension staff

“I’m not sure even if we should expect anything from Iowa State anymore. I know they’ve really come a long way in the past ten years with the Leopold center and the work that they’ve done with PFI, but then you’ve got to look at the bigger picture. Look at where the money is coming from. Is it coming from organizations that are interested in organic agriculture or some sort of sustainable variant of agriculture? No, of course, not. It’s the Monsanto and Pioneers out there that are pumping big bucks into Iowa State. And for what? So we can all switch to rotational grazing? I just can’t see how they’re going to be able to break out of the grip of these big companies. And I think people are starting to see this.”—tenant

What types of leases are used?

Approximately 9 out of 10 of those interviewed described the use of a cash-rent lease in their particular rental arrangement.

“It just makes life a lot easier, you know. There’s nothing to split or divide up at the end of harvest. This way I get my 150 an acre, and he gets his money.”—landlord

“I used to have a crop-share arrangement with my boy about ten years ago, but I’ve switched to cash-rent. It’s more reliable this way for me, and for my son. And now I just don’t keep up with the markets like I used to so it’s better this way, if he just runs the whole show now.”—landlord

“I don’t know how those guys do it. I mean shit, with the way the markets are, or have been for the past five or six years, how the hell do they make any money with crop-share leases? No really, tell me how they do it? You know, cause with corn below 2 bucks, why would any landlord be foolish enough to do it. I can see why tenants would love it. I know mine would, but why risk it if you’re a landlord? Especially if you can be guaranteed 150 or 160 an acre with a cash-rent lease. It just don’t make any sense.”—landlord

“Sure I would [like to be in a crop-share arrangement with my landlord]. But I don’t think he’s crazy enough to try it. I mean honestly, really, I don’t think I’d do crop-share if I was a landlord, so I can see where he’s coming from. It’s just too risky in this day and age. The markets are just too unpredictable.”—tenant

“Yeah, crop-share would be great, it helps spread the risk a little bit between us, but I don’t see it happening. I don’t mind cash-rent though all that much. At least this way I have a little more autonomy than if we were doing a crop-share thing together.”—tenant

“It’s always been cash-rent. We’ve never even discussed crop-share. To be perfectly honest, I’ve never even much thought about it. Does much of it still exist?”

[response: “I’ve found a few cases of it.”]

“I could see maybe a father-son landlord-tenant relationship where that might exist and even work, but otherwise I couldn’t imagine it in, say, my situation.”—tenant

The few that utilized the crop-share leasing arrangement did so for a number of reasons.

“Being interested in farming sustainably, you’ve got much more leverage, of course, in sustainable agriculture and so forth if you’re taking the risk with the farmer, so that’s why I prefer crop share...cash rent may be less risky, of course, but you lose that leverage.”—landlord

“I like it [crop-share leasing arrangement] because it allows me to still be in farming. I may not be out in the field as much as I would like, my knees have taken care of that for me, but this way I still have some say, and I like that.”

Yet the most common reason for a crop-share leasing arrangement was that it provided an equitable relationship that allowed the father and son to both farm together.

Additionally, it acted as a stepping stone towards which the father eventually hands the operation over to his son.

“The crop-share arrangement works good for us because it allows us both [the father and son] to still be involved in the day to day operation of the farm.”—tenant

“It’s [crop-share] a little more farmer friendly. It was a little less risky for us and being an aunt she felt that she could, you know afford to share a little of that risk.”—tenant

“I started renting from my parents about fifteen years ago. Money was pretty tight and they were just trying to help us out. That’s how it really got started. They were just trying to help us make ends meet. And it seems to work because we’re doing fine financially now, but we’re still in the same crop-share lease.”—tenant

“[my son] will eventually take over the operation, so this arrangement [crop share] works out well for both of us. It gives him access to land at a price that he can afford, I am still able to farm, and we both make a little money out of it.”—landlord

Some interviewees also expressed some hostility toward the prevalence of cash-rent arrangements in Iowa, which were seen as being less beginner farmer friendly and seemed to favor the larger operators who have the capital to pay the high cash rents that are being sought throughout the state.

“And these people are paying cash rents –the latest, the highest that I have heard for this spring is \$156 an acre; and it’s for a farm that butts up to a fence of ours. And that landlord could rent that to a young farm, to a younger farmer that could rent that on a crop share basis. But they choose to rent it to one of the guys in the county who will pay the highest bucks.”—tenant

“A lot of us can’t compete with these operators that have 5,000 plus acres. These guys come into the community and just have to rent everything they can get their hands on, regardless of the price. And you know why, cause they got 100,000 dollar combines and tractors. How else can you afford something like that unless you have thousands of acres of land to use them on? It’s not fair. And then what about the beginning farmer? Hell, he doesn’t have a chance unless he’s got a family member that will give him some land, or sell it to him cheap.”—tenant

“There are a couple guys from southern Iowa that have a couple thousand acres up here. They’re here for a day or two to plant, cultivate, spray, and harvest and then they’re gone. They have nothing to do with anyone in [the] community or anything. Just come up here for a few days and leave. I’d much rather see that land go to a young local boy who’s part of the community, who we know and trust. Nobody knows anything about these other guys.”—tenant

What special factors such as gender relations do agricultural agency professionals need to be aware of and sensitive to in working with rented land situations?

With regard to gender relations, agriculture professionals need to be sensitive to the power discrepancies that seem to still persist between men and women within agriculture.⁹ *Specifically, Extension needs to reach out in a proactive manner to the growing number of women landlords that reside both within and outside of the state.¹⁰ Many women expressed feelings of exclusion and alienation, and a desire to form networks with other female landlords.*

“And so we’ve got a nephew who’s renting land from Aunt Mabel, okay? And Aunt Mabel lives in town. She’s eighty years old. She doesn’t owe anybody anything. She owns her little house and she gets her social security and she’s gettin’ thirty dollars a year per acre rent off this ground. And she’s pretty happy. But she’s heard that some people are getting more and so she comes into my office and sits down across from my, from my table here, my desk, and wants to know if thirty dollars [an acre] is too much. Now, when you write your publication you tell me how to answer that question. I may know the renter. I may know the tenant. What am I to do? So I get my custom rate sheet out. I’ve got – she asked me, I’ve gotta share that information. Either that, or I’m gonna lie to her, and I ain’t gonna do that. And that, believe me, that is not made up. Okay? That is not made up. That’s a real live situation. And I almost without exception will have one to five of those a year. Yes. I kid you not. And almost without exception it’s family related. And it’s, that’s real. So, you know, I don’t worry about the tenant side of knowledge. Tenant’s side of knowledge is pretty good. They know what they’re doin’. They know what’s goin’ on. It’s the landowner side, the landlord knowledge base that’s really lacking. Being able to stay up with technology, being able to stay up with what’s happening in that business, you know. How to set a cash rent or how to set up a crop share or whatever. Those kinds of things are what they need to know. And if the landlord’s a women whose husband just died and has never had anything to really do with the business side of farming, that’s who we really need to focus on. The future of landlords in this state is goin’ to be the women.”—Extension staff

“We do need to do a better job of outreaching to women in agriculture. It’s as though we’ve completely forgot about them. But they make up such a large percentage of landowners now in Iowa I can’t understand why we still ignore them. You know? A lot of these women are being taken advantage of because they don’t have the knowledge, and they’re afraid to ask for that knowledge for fear that they will be looked down upon because they are just women. I know it’s sad but that’s how a lot of them feel. They just don’t know who to turn to. So, if there’s something that we could do better, or more of, to improve the situation of women landowners in Iowa, I would say we need to do a better job of outreaching to those women. Courting them. Letting them know that we are here for them. And maybe having special meetings or presentations just for women

⁹ Females owned 46.2 percent of all Iowa farmland in 1997 (a number slightly below the 1992 figure of 48.3 percent). On the other hand, males owned 53.8 percent of all Iowa farmland in 1997 (a number slightly up from the 1992 figure of 51.0 percent) (Pieper and Harl 2000). Females, in addition, own 51.3 percent of leased farmland (Pieper and Harl 2000), a finding that follows a national pattern (Rogers 1991).

¹⁰ According to the census of agriculture, in 1997 5.1 percent of all owner-operators in Iowa are women, up from 3.9 percent in 1992. In Audubon County, 3.2 percent of all owner-operators were women in 1997, up from 2.7 percent in 1992.

landowners so they can know that we're serious about trying to help them out"—Extension staff

"I would have to say that they treat me differently because I'm a woman. I mean, I was born and raised on a farm and have been on one my whole life so I can talk shop if you want me to. And before [my husband] died, I was quite involved in the day to day operations of the farm. I don't know if [a neighbor] told you this, but this is actually my homestead. This was my family's farm and [my husband] and I bought it from mom and dad in the 60s. So I've always had quite a bit of say of what went on here. But that doesn't seem to matter. My tenants still think they have to dumb down everything to me. And, I'm sorry to say, if I go to our field specialist with a question, or someone else in Extension, they pretty much treat me the same way. I go to ask questions but they think I'm stupid. How else am I suppose to keep up with what's going on if I don't ask questions?"—female landlord

"Well, one thing I think women landowners would like to see is for them to be recognized as a growing and important segment of Iowa agriculture. From the women I've talked to, many of them feel that there's no place for them—for information and consultation or just so they can talk to other women landlords. Men have their corn growers' association meetings, or cattlemens' association, but what do women landowners have that's similar?"—female landlord

"The thing that they run into trouble – I have some elderly female landlords. And the FSA gets to sending 'em papers and papers. And they just get totally confused; and a lot of times I'm confused in what they're sending. And they don't know what, you know, what's even going on part of the time. So these women, rightfully so, get quite confused. And this used to cause some tension between us. But I've found that if you set down with them and explain whatever it is you want to do with them—so for example only spraying once in the spring instead of in the fall and spring—they appreciate it and it's resulted in a lot less tension between us. It seems like we're at least on the same page now"—male tenant

Moreover, agriculture professionals need to be sensitive to the cultural constraints that still exist in agriculture today. For instance, the belief among many that weedy fields equal a bad farmer.

"So many people today still equate weedy fields to a bad farmer, which equals a bad person"—Extension staff

"Yeah, I think cash renters really have a lot of pressure in the fact that they need to trim the corners of the field and – because the landlord's gonna be driving around. And they want that – he's used to looking at his yard on Country Club Drive – and he wants the farm to look the same way."—tenant

"I think that's very real [referring to the social constraints to keep rows clean]. I think it's very real. And that varies a lot, okay? If you've got a recently retired farmer, and

he's had very clean fields in the past, his expectations are gonna be different than maybe the guy that's 75 or 80 years old and that's not a straight line in there. You know, some of those older folk kept those fields clean and they expect that."—Extension staff

Additionally, a number of respondents discussed how they wished they could farm more sustainably but their level of knowledge towards sustainable farming is limited, thus limiting their ability to do so.

"I guess I would suggest that for sustainability, I think I'm fairly typical of most guys, and I really don't feel like I have the knowledge to understand – and I certainly don't have the experience which is the critical area – to really go out and make a sustainable operation work. And I think I would make so many serious mistakes until I got some experience and understand what was goin' on, and by that time I'd be bankrupt. And so it would seem like to me certain people like myself would really need somebody to really hold their hand and—and, well, number one, I think I'd have to go on a very small basis. Very small part acres, get some experience."—landlord

I personally feel a person that farms truly sustainable organic really has a lot more knowledge than the chemical farmer. You know, we buy all our problems in these tiny cans, you know, and that takes care of it. We don't have to understand which weeds are comin' along and all this. We just buy Roundup, you know. In a way your I.Q. can go down because you're payin' all this money out to somebody to tell you what to do and just put this stuff on and put that on and then go do it and it'll work. But the guy that can fire and kill weeds himself rather than buy it in a tin can and everything, he's gotta really be on top of it."—landlord

"I started readin' everything that there was on sustainable farming and everything that went through the – I'm also on the committee for the allocation of agriculture funds – state funding. And I am very disturbed about the way that they are not allocating any more money for sustainable farming. That's another place you need to start, poundin' on the people that are gonna give those people a chance to get started, especially women who would be interested in little plots, you know, to start with. We've gotta be educated."—landlord

"You know, we're farming – we're in transition towards organic. So I'm – my 89 year old father still lives on the place—and I'm farming like he did back in the 1930's and 40's prior to the chemicals. A lot of the same practices, the livestock, the weed control and so on is basically what he was doing when he was farming a large scale farm back just prior to the war. So we feel like we're – that generation, it's come back around and rather than all the high tech glitz and everything that it's supposed to be all this progress, we're going back to more and more of the techniques to try and make the farm sustainable because the ground, it needs the forages and it needs the organic matter, and you can't just call up the co-op and say, "Hey, you know, come in and do what the soil sample says," because the ground just won't support that over the long period. And as it varies more, that even makes it more challenging. You know, the uniform soils, without the erosion, those are the simple ones. No one said farming right was easy. That's the

problem. Farming has gotten easy over the years. But to farm right, to farm sustainably, requires work. Farmers don't like to work anymore. Not like they used to.”—landlord

Agriculture professionals also need to be aware of the difficulty sustainably oriented landlords and tenants have in finding one another. In addition, respondents also explained the need for some type of compatibility test or check list that could be administered to both the landlord and tenant to reveal if indeed the two have similar farming beliefs.

“I put an ad in the paper two years ago for land that was just comin' out after ten years in CRP to get a sustainable – 'cause I wanted to go into sustainable farming on some of our land. And I got a real creep. Ruined our land. Ruined it. And I knew more about farmin' than he did. He plowed up all the ground, completely left it. Just walked away from it. And he hadn't put anything into it. I think they need to have someplace that you can - if you as a landlord are interested in having someone farm your ground that way, then there should be a way that we as landlords can find out whether they're gonna be real responsible. You know? I'm still payin' for the damage that he did on the farm.”—landlord

“I've found it quite difficult finding tenants to rent my land that don't want to dump excessive amounts of anhydrous and other chemicals. Most tenants I've found like to farm conventionally because that's the only way they know how.”—landlord

“I'd love to find a landowner that would allow me to farm more sustainably, but it just doesn't seem like many of them exist.”—tenant

“Sustainable agriculture is such a vague term. It's hard to find tenants that feel the same way as you do. And even if you do find someone that claims they believe strongly in sustainable agriculture, they could be defining it in a completely different way that you define it. So even then it's difficult to find someone that thinks the same way as you do.”—landlord

Finally, as alluded to earlier, regardless of whether this belief is true or not, Extension staff are viewed as not possessing a deep knowledge of alternative forms of production practices, nor as possessing the necessary technical knowledge required for sustainable/organic agriculture.

“Well, it's one thing to tell them to do it [adopt sustainable practices], but I don't care what anyone says, sustainable farming is damn hard. These sustainable and organic farmers are some of the smartest people in the world, I think. And some of the people, sadly, some of the people that know the least about sustainable ag., but who should know a lot about it, are Extension personnel. They're from a different generation, you know, only concerned about productivity. They only know productivity. These are the people that should be out there pushing sustainable and organic ag. but they don't know the first thing about it. We need to educate these outreach people so that they are able to outreach. And then second, they need to actually do outreach. We're just so

understaffed out here that outreach just doesn't exist anymore. But that's what we need to do. We need to go out and push these alternative practices and not just wait for someone to come in so we can give them a pamphlet."—Extension staff

"The field specialist is good guy, but he just doesn't know anything about sustainable agriculture. He'd be the last person I'd go to for information on sustainable ag. That's what's so disappointing. How can ISU be expected to break away from the old way of farming if its soldiers don't know the first thing about it. Well, that's not fair, they know some things about it. But it's the technical information that we need, you know? And that's beyond their reach."—tenant

"To be a successful organic farmer, you need to have a knowledge of soil, insects, pest, or whatever, of everything. A level much more deep than what conventional farming requires. A level you just can't seem to get from Extension, or anyone it seems for that matter"—NRCS staff / tenant

Conclusion—The Next Step

Judging by the responses given to this project by landlords, tenants, and agriculture professionals, we have indeed tapped into an issue that is of great concern for many involved in Iowa agriculture. Consistently throughout the interviews participants remarked about the "timeliness" and "great significance" of this research. One member of Extension in fact stated, "I can't think of an issue here in Iowa that is more prudent than the issue of tenancy. Having said that, I also can't think on a issue that has been more neglected." In light of these remarks, and many others that are similar in nature and tone, we hope that future research will continue to explore the complex, multi-faceted social relationships that exist between the landlord and tenant. Indeed, not only does the future of agriculture reside in the tenant-landlord relation, but quite possibly the future of sustainable agriculture as well. As one tenant declared, "If sustainable agriculture is going to work, it's got to work first on rented land."

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Appendix

Table 1 Percentage of Land Owned by Residents of Iowa, 1982, 1992, and 1997

Residency	1982	1992	1997
U.S. citizen and Iowa resident	93.6	90.6	86.2
Non-Iowa resident	6.4	8.7	13.8

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:18)

Table 2 Percentage of Leased Iowa Farmland by State of Residency, 1997

Residency	Cash rent	Crop share	Other	Total
Iowa resident	49.2	27.4	3.3	79.9
Non-Iowa resident	7.4	11.5	1.2	20.1

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:26)

Table 3 Tenure of Iowa Farmland, 1982, 1992, and 1995, as a Percentage of Farmland for all Owners

Tenure	1982	1992	1997
Operate solely	54.1	42.3	30.8
Operate with help	0.9	7.8	7.8
Cash rent lease	21.1	26.9	34.9
Crop share lease	21.1	21.8	23.7
Other leases	1.0	0.9	2.8

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:12)

Table 4 Percentage of Leased Iowa Farmland by Gender, 1997

Gender	Cash rent	Crop share	Other renting	Total
Male	27.2	18.8	2.7	48.7
Female	30.2	20.3	0.9	51.3

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:24)

Table 5 Gender Cross-Tabulated with Age in Percentage of Farmland Owned, 1982, 1992, and 1997

Gender	<u>below 35 years old</u>			<u>35-65 years old</u>			<u>over 65 year of age</u>		
	1982	1992	1997	1982	1992	1997	1982	1992	1997
Females	5.0	2.8	1.0	26.6	21.9	25.5	14.9	23.5	19.6
Males	6.6	3.8	1.5	32.7	28.5	31.0	14.2	18.9	19.0

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:20)

Table 6 Occupation of Farmland Owners as a Percentage of Farmland Owned, 1982, 1992, and 1997

Occupation	1982	1992	1997
Farmwife/housewife	31.4	33.6	28.4
Farmer/farm manager	34.9	29.6	38.6
Professional/technical	11.9	12.0	12.8
Clerical	3.9	4.3	3.5
Other occupations	17.9	20.6	16.7

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:20)

Table 7 Percentage of Leased Iowa Farmland by Owner Occupation, Cross-tabulated with Leasing Method, 1997

Occupation	Cash rent	Crop share	Other arrangement	Total
Farmwife/housewife	18.1	13.2	1.1	32.4
Farmer/manager	16.2	12.0	1.0	29.2
Professional/technical	8.3	5.4	1.0	14.7
Clerical	1.9	1.1	0.0	3.0
Landlords in other Occupations	12.3	7.2	1.0	20.5

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:26)

Table 8 Percentage of Leased Iowa Farmland by Length of Tenant's Tenure, Cross-tabulated with Lease Method, 1997

Tenure length of tenant	Cash rent	Crop share	Other arrangement	Total
One year	3.6	1.9	0.0	5.5
2-5 years	18.2	6.7	1.0	25.9
6-10 years	14.3	9.0	1.3	24.6
11-20 years	11.0	11.0	0.0	22.0
Over 20 years	6.2	4.8	1.1	13.0
Multiple tenant lengths	3.4	4.8	1.1	9.0

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:26)

Table 9 Percentage of Leased Iowa Farmland by Region Cross-tabulated with Leasing Method, 1997

Region	Cash rent	Crop share	Other	Total	% land leased
NW	5.9	4.0	0.0	9.9	52.8
SW	3.5	9.1	0.0	12.6	60.7
N	5.4	4.9	0.0	10.3	82.2
NC	7.6	6.2	0.8	14.5	65.5
S	5.5	5.3	2.2	12.9	49.2
NE	10.6	4.4	0.5	15.6	61.7
E	18.6	4.9	0.6	24.1	64.3

Source: Pieper and Harl (2000:24)

Table 10 Percentage of Leased Farmland in Audubon County, 1997 and 1992

Year	Percentage
1997	41.8
1992	36.0

Source: 1997 Iowa census of agriculture

Table 11 Percentage of Farms in Audubon County Reporting Cash-rent as a Source of Revenue, 1997, 1992, and 1987

Year	Percentage
1997	45.1
1992	47.2
1987	43.6

Source: 1997 Iowa census of agriculture