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## 2009 Farm and Rural Life Poll: Personal and financial well-being\*

by J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., extension sociologist; Paul Lasley, extension sociologist; Peter Korsching, professor; and Chris Kast, research assistant

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, the Farm Poll is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. This article highlights information from the 2009 survey on farm policy and commodity production.

### Personal and financial well-being

Farming can be a stressful occupation. Much is outside of the farmer's control, from the vagaries of weather, to market ups and downs. Every five years, the Farm Poll asks farmers a number of questions about stress: their personal levels of stress, stress among family members and stress levels among farmers in their communities.

Farmers were asked to rate their current levels of personal stress on a scale of one to five, with one being no stress and five representing very

high stress. Results suggest that farmers on the whole were experiencing low levels of stress at the outset of 2009. Fifty-seven percent rated their stress levels as low, 11 percent as very low and two percent indicated that they had no stress at all. Twenty-seven percent reported high levels of personal stress, and three percent rated their level of stress as very high.

A second set of questions asked farmers to rate changes in stress levels—for them, for their families, and for other farmers in their communities—over the last five years. Thirty-seven percent of farmers reported that overall, their personal level of stress had increased in the last five years, compared to 22 percent reporting a decrease, and 42 percent reporting no change (Table 1). Twenty-seven percent indicated that their concern about their level of stress had increased, compared to 17 percent reporting a decrease in concern and 56 percent no change. Regarding day-to-day stress lev-

els, 28 percent of farmers cited an increase, 19 percent a decrease and 54 percent reported no change. In terms of stress among their family

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 For those of you subscribing to the handbook, the following updates are included.

**2010 Corn and Soybean Loan Rates** -- A1-34 (2 pages)

**Iowa Farmland Rental Rates** -- C2-09 (1 page)

Please add these files to your handbook and remove the out-of-date material. *continued on page 6*

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members, 34 percent of farmers expressed that stress levels had risen, 16 percent reported declines and 50 percent cited no change. Fifty-three percent responded that stress levels among farmers in their communities had increased, eight percent noted decreases, and 39 percent reported no change.

Finally, participants were asked to compare their financial situation to what it had been at the same time the year before, and to rate their overall satisfaction with their lives. In response to the question “How would you describe your financial situation today compared to this time last year?” slightly over a quarter of farmers expressed that they were somewhat better off (22 percent) or much better off (five percent).

Over one-third reported declines: 29 percent replied that they were worse off, and seven percent were much worse off. Thirty-eight percent indicated that their situation was unchanged.

Responses to the question “How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered?” were mostly positive. Fifty-eight percent of participants expressed that they were satisfied and 16 percent were very satisfied. Nineteen percent marked the neutral category and only six percent reported that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied their lives.

**Survey information**

Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station and the Iowa

Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship are all partners in the Farm Poll effort. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farmers who responded to this year’s survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll.

**Who participates?**

The 2009 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in January and February to a statewide panel of 2,201 farm operators. Usable surveys were received from 1,268 farmers, resulting in a 58 percent response rate. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old, and had been farming for 39 years. Fifty percent of farmers reported that farm income made up more than half of their overall 2008 household income, and an additional 20 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from farming. Copies of this or any other year’s reports are available from your county Extension office, the Extension Online Store ([www.extension.iastate.edu/store](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)), Extension Sociology ([www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll.html](http://www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll.html)), or from the authors.

**Table 1. Stress**

	Greatly or somewhat decreased	Remained the same	Greatly or somewhat increased
Over the past five years...	—Percentage—		
Have stress levels among farmers in your community .....	8	39	53
Has your personal level of stress .....	22	42	37
The level of stress in my family has.....	16	50	34
On a day-to-day basis, has your stress.....	19	54	28
Has your concern with your level of stress .....	17	56	27

*\*Reprinted with permission from the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, 2009 Summary Report, PM 2093. Renea Miller provided valuable layout assistance to the questionnaire and this report. The Iowa Department of Land Stewardship, Division of Statistics, assisted in the data collection.*