Initial Impressions from Summer 2011 Farmer Interviews

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(on behalf of the Interview Team)
Caveats for Our Initial Impressions

• These are impressions, not findings

• Data coding and analysis processes will produce findings
Learning to Farm

- Farmers learn by doing
- Some have also earned degrees in agriculturally-related fields
- Farmers are lifelong learners
Farming Satisfactions/Challenges

• Most satisfying
  – Being one’s own boss
  – Participating in the full process of growing a crop

• Most challenging
  – Weather
  – Financial issues
Community Trends

- Rural communities in Kansas are stagnant or in decline
- Few growth areas
- Farmers often travel long distances and to multiple places for their various needs
- Fondness for local communities and sense of loss of what used to be
Community Involvement

• Farmers tend to be involved in their communities (church, 4H, various ag boards, School Boards, etc.)
• Community involvement declines as farmers get older
Significant Farm Changes (last 10 years)

- Many conversions to no-till farming
- Technological changes (e.g. GPS with tractors, other new equipment)
Plans for Expansion

• Younger farmers want to expand

• Access to land appears to be limiting factor

• Older farmers less interested in expansion
Planting Decisions

• Most farmers follow a fairly set rotation
• Exceptions to rotation hinge on factors such as crop prices and soil conditions
• Occasional interest in trying something different (e.g. oats, sunflowers) and/or diversifying operation
Water Quantity Perceptions

- Mixed perceptions

- Some concern, but not overwhelming, about aquifer depletion in western Kansas
Water Quality Perceptions

• General perceptions that overall water quality is adequate or even improving
• Water quality tends to be equated with household water, especially for those on well water
• Less interest in/familiarity with surface water
Use of Conservation Practices

• A lot of interest in and adoption of no-till (or minimum till) farming

• Terraces also fairly common

• Less common: cover crops, buffer strips
Farm Economics

- Many if not most farmers and/or their spouses had an off-farm job
- In some cases, off-farm income was essential
- Wide range of financial conditions
Farm Programs

• Difficult set of questions

• Some CRP participation, plus EQIP

• Discussing government support was topic of discomfort for many
Use of Crop Insurance

- Large majority of farmers have some type of crop insurance
- Crop insurance does not appear to have much if any influence on land use decisions
- Common view of insurance is as way to cover costs in bad crop years
Biofuels Experience

- Very few farmers had marketed crops directly to biofuels plant
- Many were unsure if co-ops to which they did market crops might work with biofuels plants
- Proximity to such facilities seems key
Perceptions of Biofuels

• Not a huge amount of interest in biofuels, either first or second generation

• General perceptions are positive

• Fair amount of concern that corn stover should not be removed from fields
Weather Observations

• Weather is a source of constant interest
• General observations about weather cycles, but no clear sense of what a “cycle” entails
• Sense of more extremes
• Much reference to Dust Bowl, 1950s, 1980s as particularly bad weather periods
Views of Climate Change

- Wide array of views
- General sense that climate may be changing
- But, not much belief in idea of human-induced change
Plans for Farm Future

• Few concrete plans for retirement

• Wide array of farmer ages means variety of responses

• Passing farm operation to children desirable but not always possible
Summary

• Very interesting summer to have done these interviews

• Extreme weather likely influenced some responses

• Team looks forward to data analysis stage
QUESTIONS?