America's Crop at Risk:
The Future of Corn and Family Farms

Introduction

Corn and the farmers who grow it have been a part of all of America's 250 years. From feeding a growing nation to foundational contributions to the early U.S. economy, corn helped make agriculture and rural America the backbone of the country, evolving from a survival staple to a powerhouse commodity.

Over the last two and a half centuries, corn, and the farmers growing it, have driven opportunities for our nation. Today, they continue to meet the needs of a modern world through advanced innovations that offer transformative impact for society in the future.

But that future is at risk. Generation after generation of farmers have faced both good years and hard ones, standing steady and resilient through it all. Farmers are trying to do that today. **Except the stakes are higher than ever before.**

Farmers make up a smaller portion of the workforce than at any time in modern history, and with that comes declining representation on issues that matter. Consolidation is a growing challenge that begins at the farmgate and runs throughout the entire supply chain, meaning that farmers are left with fewer options on both the supply and demand sides of their businesses.

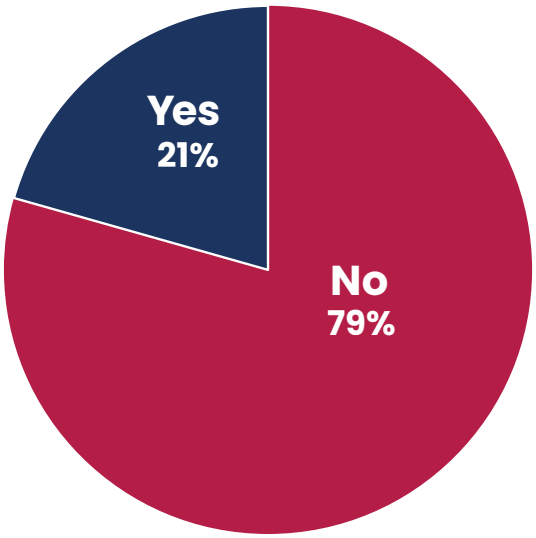
Corn growers are striving to support their families and businesses on farms that often require millions of dollars to enter and substantial ongoing cash flow to operate. Yet, as growers enter a fourth consecutive year of losses on corn sales, cash flow pressures are forcing more farm households to rely on off-farm work to simply sustain the farm. There is a growing structural difference between supply and demand, and while there are demand opportunities on the horizon, farmers don't have years to wait.

In early 2026, NCGA surveyed 1,000 corn growers nationwide to understand how recent years have shaped the outlook for their farms and their future. Combined with insights from NCGA grower leaders, the results point to a troubling outlook for family farms without meaningful action. Nearly 80% of growers believe the next generation will not be able to succeed on their farm without support from the current generation—yet that generation is already under significant strain.

Generational Farm Transfer at Risk

79% of farmers surveyed say the next generation needs support.

Question: Could the next generation on your farm succeed without support from the current generation?



Source: NCGA Survey of Over 1,000 Corn Growers Administered by Farm Journal Closed 1/14/26, NCGA Calculations

In this look back at what has changed, what hasn't, and what must change for the future of farming, one thing is clear – 2026 isn't just America's 250th year. It's a pivotal moment in time for U.S. corn growers.

Fewer Farmers, Detrimental Loss of Farms

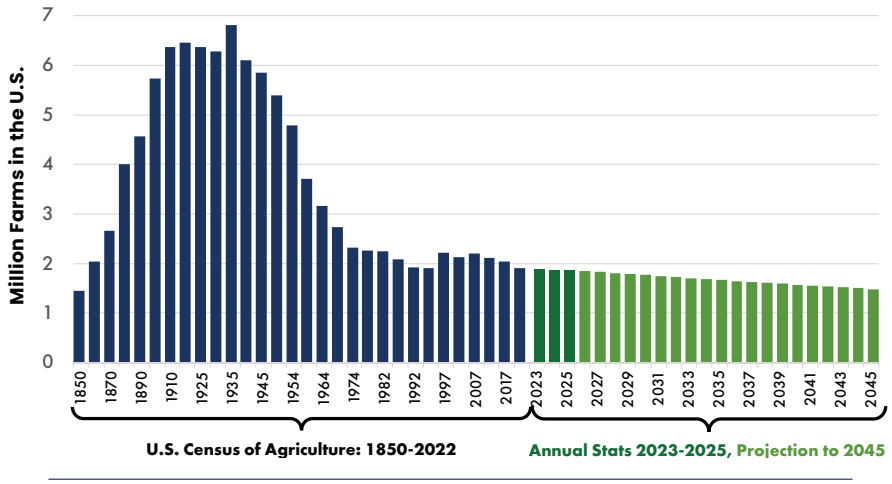
At the nation's founding in 1776, roughly 90-95% of the nation's 2.5 million people lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture, forming the backbone of the colonial economy. The work was physically demanding, relying on human and horse powered labor.

Today, agriculture and related industries provide about 10% of U.S. employment, with only 1.3% of the labor force working directly on farms.

The number of farms in the U.S. rose from around 1.4 million in the 1850 census to peak near 6.8 million in 1935, before declining to 1.9 million in 2022, and 1.87 million in 2025. Since 1960, farms have disappeared at an average annual rate of 1.16%. While this may not seem like much on an annual basis, the compounding effect has ushered in a dramatic change in rural America—reducing population, hollowing out local economies with fewer farmers and shrinking agribusiness activity, and weakening local tax bases as less land remains in production.

Detrimental Loss of Farms

At the current 1.15% annual decline, the U.S. would have the fewest farms since 1850 by 2045



Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture, NCGA Calculations

While many who work in agriculture recall the 1980s as the "lost generation" of farmers due to widespread farm bankruptcies, farm numbers declined even faster in the 1960s (3.09% annually) and 1970s (1.96% annually) than in the 1980s (1.05% annually). **The average annual decline so far in the 2020s—1.15%—is nearly equal to the 65-year average and higher than the 1980s, marking the steepest loss since the 1970s.** If this pace continues, the U.S. will fall below 1.5 million farms within twenty years, a level not seen since 1850.

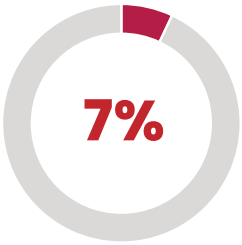
In many rural communities, agriculture remains the primary economic engine, supporting jobs, schools and essential services. As farms disappear, the consequences extend well beyond the farmgate—eroding local economies, reducing employment, and accelerating the decline of rural communities.

Real Farm Perspective:

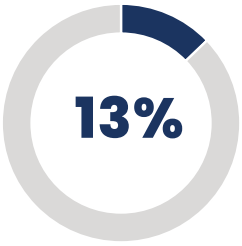
When asked what farm changes would result from the current economic environment in 2026, 7% of over 1,000 farmers surveyed said they expect to retire or exit farming earlier than planned, likely to preserve remaining capital amid ongoing losses. Separately, 13% anticipate postponing retirement or farm transition, likely due to a lack of available capital for younger growers to enter the business. The results suggest farmers without a successor are more likely to exit early, while those with a successor find it difficult to transition as planned.

Farm Succession Roadblocks

Capital strains impact both ends of the succession spectrum.



7% of farmers surveyed will retire or exit farming earlier than planned.



13% of farmers surveyed will postpone retirement of farm transition.

Source: NCGA Survey of Over 1,000 Corn Growers Administered by Farm Journal Closed 1/14/26, NCGA Calculations

About 15,000 farms were lost from 2023 to 2024. If 7% of farmers exited this year, as suggested in NCGA's survey, the U.S. could **lose over 131,000 farms in a single year—dropping total farms to 1.7 million. That pace would be seven times the average annual decline of the past decade and the largest single year loss since 1982.**

Mechanization Evolves, yet Labor Demands Persist

As power shifted from animals to engines, mechanization replaced much of the manual labor needed to grow row crops. Wheeled tractors become more prevalent beginning in the 1920s, coinciding with peak use of horses and mules. These mechanical advances, combined with the post-World War I farm economy crisis, pushed farmers to seek off-farm work to supplement their income. By 1930, 30% of farmers were also working off the farm—the first time the census captured this—with notable shares spending more than 100 or even 200 days per year at other jobs.

Since then, reliance on off-farm income has steadily increased. More than 60% of farm operators worked off the farm in 2022, with nearly half working at least 100 days and 40% exceeding 200 days. **Today, the people responsible for supplying our nation and world with food, fuel, and fiber increasingly depend on outside income because farming alone cannot support a family in 2026.**

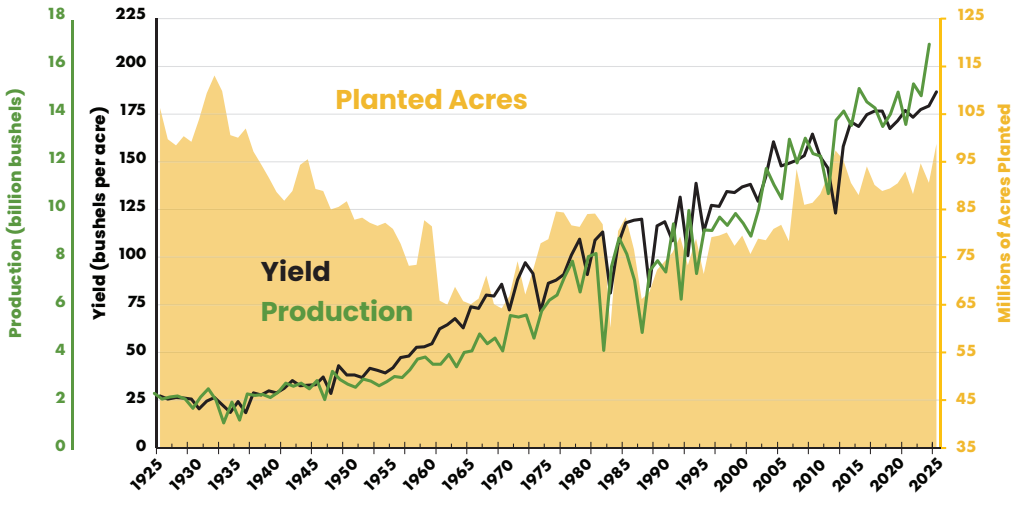
Greater Production on the Same Land, Relative Profitability Still Challenged

The need for additional income arises because the remarkable productivity gains of the past century don't equate to greater profitability.

Today's smaller farm population harvests nearly the same 300 million cropland acres once managed by far more farmers at the turn of the 20th century—a pattern mirrored in corn production. In 1925, 106 million acres produced 2.4 billion bushels of corn; by 2025, 98.8 million acres produced 17.0 billion bushels—more than seven times the output on fewer acres.

Corn Production Rises on Less Land

Productivity gains drive corn production up seven times since 1925.



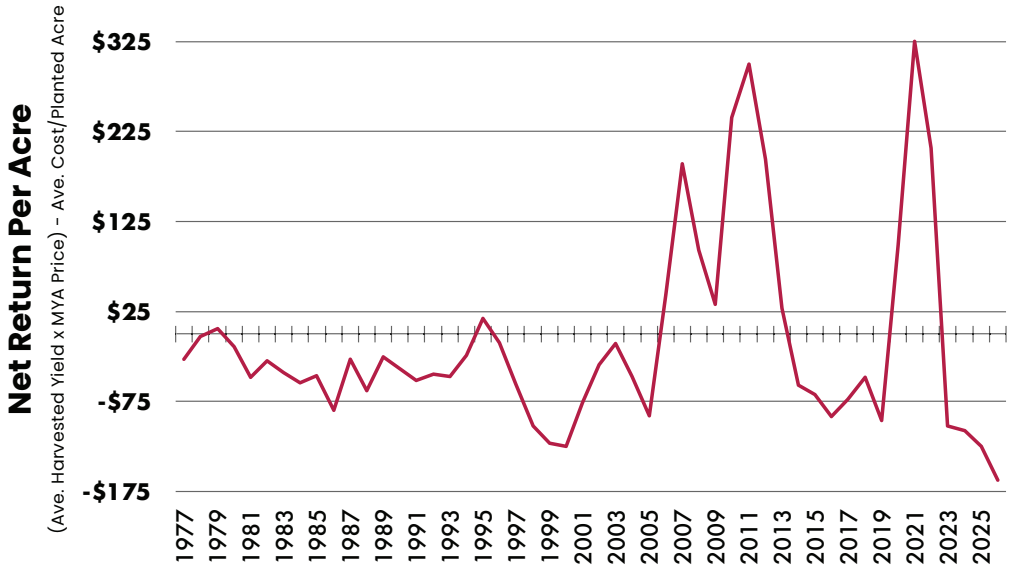
Source: USDA NASS Data as of 1/12/26, NCGA Calculations

Improvements such as mechanization, technology adoption, seed innovations and management gains have enhanced productivity, but unfortunately greater productivity doesn't guarantee greater profitability in today's economic environment.

Profitability has its ups and downs. A USDA data set tracking costs and returns since 1976 doesn't indicate an upward trend in profitability, but rather intensifying swings that make it increasingly difficult for farmers to manage.

Variability in Corn Profitability

Intensifying swings in corn net returns per acre over time.



Source: USDA ERS, NASS Data as of 2/1/26, NCGA Calculations

Corn farmers have an amazing story of increasing their productivity, while also increasing their efficiency, and this trend is expected to continue into the future. But a growing structural gap between supply and demand, an ongoing and growing risk for U.S. corn farmers, would put even greater pressure on profitability. There are demand opportunities for U.S. corn – but those opportunities are not free from obstacles. This is a critical point for regulatory, policy, and investment to come together to pave a future for U.S. corn. A future for the American farmer.

Consolidation Spreads, Farm Costs Rise

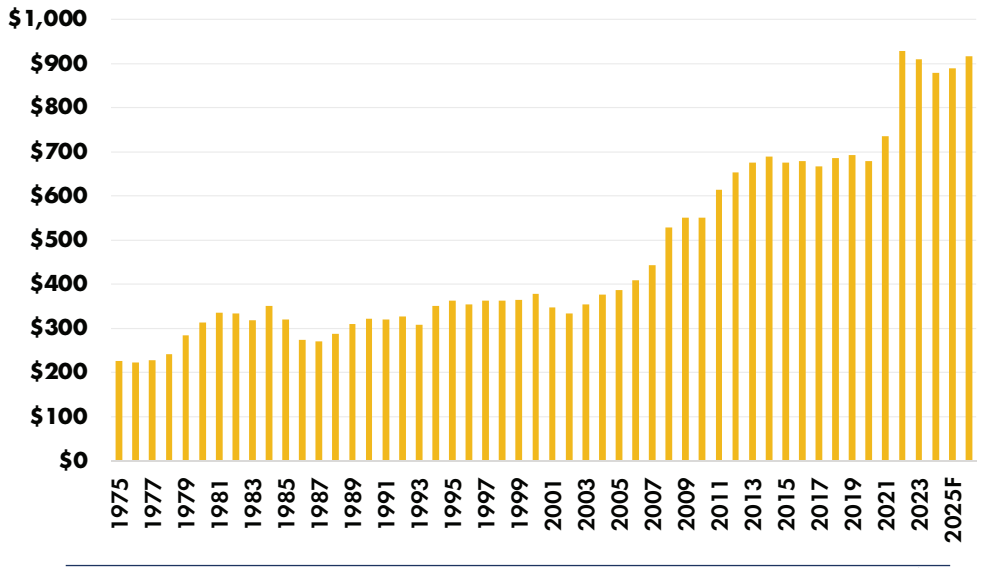
As farmers navigate increasingly volatile profits and losses, they are seeking not just additional income, but stability. A USDA survey shows the primary reasons farmers work off the farm are access to more reliable and lucrative income and benefits such as health insurance and retirement security. In its February 2026 update, USDA estimated off-farm income accounts for 80% of the average family farm household's income in 2025, up from 53% in 1960, and negligible levels prior to the 1920s.

This reliance on off-farm income reflects the inherent risk of farming. Corn production is highly dependent on environmental conditions and subject to volatile commodity markets.

While farming has always been an inherently risky business, rising production costs—driven by dependence on specialized inputs and equipment supplied by a limited number of firms—have steadily increased the cost of producing corn over the past fifty years, forcing more farm families to rely on income earned beyond the farm.

Stifling Corn Production Costs

Average cost to grow an acre of corn is steadily rising.



Source: USDA NASS, ERS Cost of Production Nov 2025 Data, Forecasts as of Dec 2025, NCGA Calculations as of 2/11/26

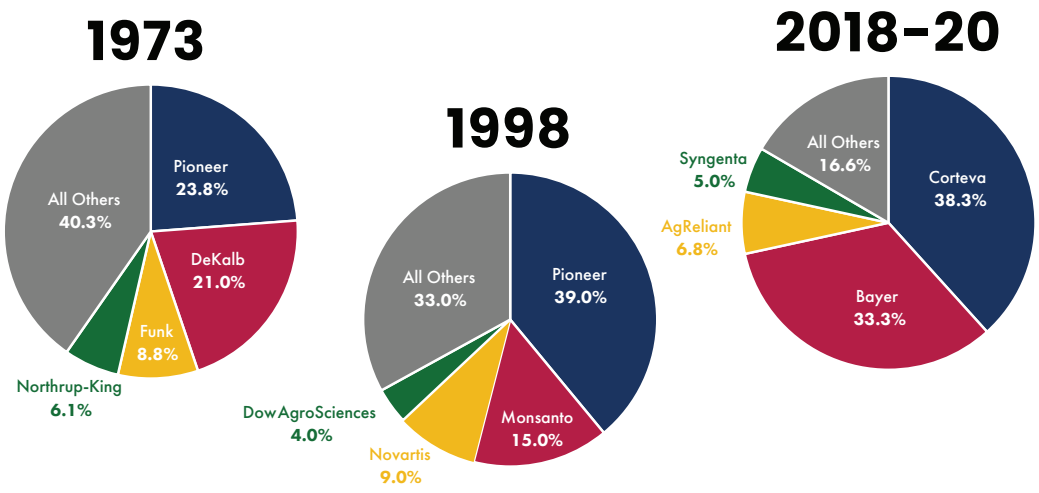
One of the biggest drivers of rising input costs over time has been widespread industry consolidation, which has increased market concentration and reduced competition across key agricultural sectors.

According to a report on corporate concentration in agriculture by ETC Group; just two companies controlled 40% of the global pesticide market in 2023. The top four firms held 43% of the global farm machinery market, six companies supply 62% of the world's potash fertilizer, and the U.S. and three other countries supplied more than 70% of global phosphate fertilizers.

This degree of concentration is a major shift from past industry structures. USDA reports that of the 190 companies operating at the inception of the corn seed industry in the 1930s, 105 were still in existence by the 1990s. While a similar number of companies remain today, their relative market power has changed dramatically. The combined market share of the four largest corn seed companies rose from 59.7% in 1973 to 67% in 1998, and reached 83.4% by 2018-20. USDA shows the top two firms alone now control 71.6% of the U.S. corn seed market.

Farm Supplier Consolidation

Percent Market Share for Corn Seed by Year



Source: USDA ERS Publication AIB #786 from 2004, EIB #256 from 2023, NCGA Calculations

The increasing value of proprietary seed traits coincides with this expansion of market power since the 1990s, contributing to rapidly rising seed costs. Using a three-year rolling average, the cost of seed to plant an acre of corn increased 660% between 1990 and 2025, more than double the 302% increase in the total per acre cost to grow corn. In that time yields rose 170% and the price farmers can sell corn was up 180%.

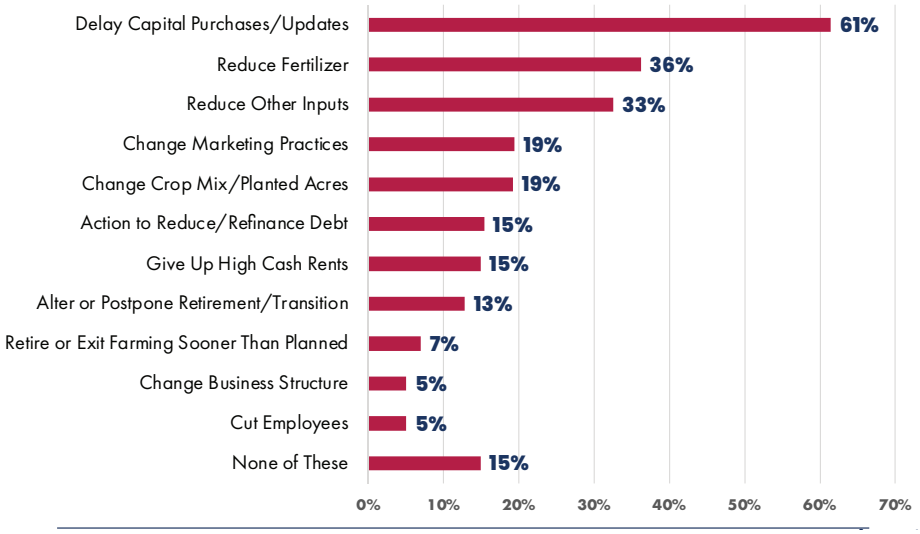
Similar patterns of rising market concentration among a declining number of companies are evident across other agricultural input sectors including fertilizer, pesticides, and farm machinery.

Real Farm Perspective:

When asked what farm changes they would make in 2026 due to the economic environment, the top three responses from farmers were cost-cutting reductions: delay capital purchases (61%), reduce fertilizer (36%), and reduce other inputs (33%). Nearly three-quarters of surveyed farmers are making at least one of these changes in 2026.

Farmer Plans Changed for 2026 Due to Farm Economy

74% of farmers plan at least one of the top three cost cuts this year.



Source: NCGA Survey of Over 1,000 Corn Growers Administered by Farm Journal Closed 1/14/26, NCGA Calculations

The challenge of consolidation extends beyond manufacturers to the retail level, where limited competition leaves farmers with few alternatives other than an outright reduction in inputs – shopping around for lower-cost inputs is limited. **The true cost of consolidation is not just higher prices, but the loss of farms, as farmers are pushed to either scale up—if possible—or exit the industry.** To afford inputs, farms must be big enough to spread rising costs across many acres and qualify for volume discounts, most accessible to the largest farms.

Seasonality Widens, Farmer Borrowing Rises

The pursuit of reliability and stability through off-farm income is driven not only by rising production costs but also shifting input-purchase timing. Farmers face growing pressure to buy inputs earlier in the production cycle.

Real Farm Perspective:

A group of corn grower leaders who have more than four decades of farming experience report that input purchases have moved forward by at least a month or two over their careers. While inputs were once commonly purchased in the spring of the crop year, many are now bought in the preceding fall or winter, driven by pre-pay incentives, tax considerations, and product availability pressures.

As a result, the cost burden is stretched over a wider period for farmers today—often purchasing inputs for the next crop before making sales from the current one. While early purchases may offer price discounts, they impose significant financial burden. But delaying purchases can mean higher prices and a competitive disadvantage at a time when margins are razor-thin.

This dynamic is driving a greater need for farm operating loans. Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City show record-high average operating loan sizes in 2025 and operating loan volumes well above long-term averages after adjusting for inflation. Although farm loan interest rates have declined from their peak, they remain above average levels of recent decades, thereby increasing the cost of carrying substantial loan balances.

Farm Financial Crisis Prevails, Generational Success Threatened

Agricultural lenders surveyed in summer 2025 expected only 52% of U.S. farm borrowers to be profitable in 2024, with profitability projected to fall below 50% in 2026. This crisis is driven by a convergence of factors: low commodity prices, rising production costs, uncertain demand, resilient land values, competitive rental markets, deteriorating credit quality, and declining loan repayment.

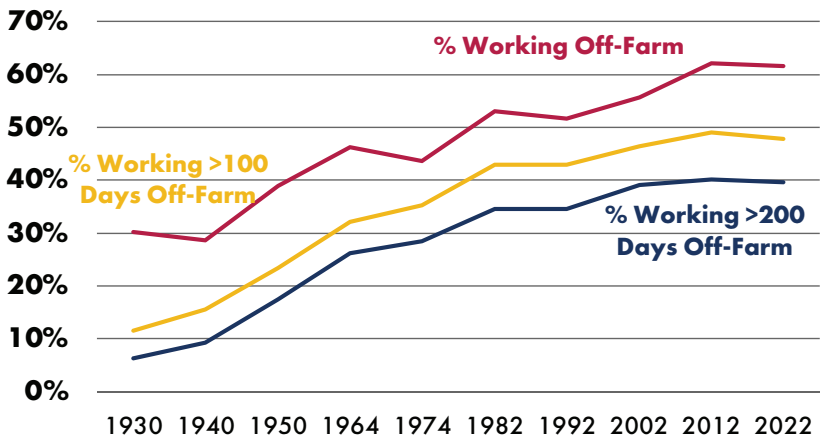
Corn growers are preparing to plant a crop that costs more to produce than they expect to sell it for—**marking the fourth consecutive year of projected losses.** Switching crops offers little relief, as most alternative crops suitable to corn-growing regions face similar economic pressures. Additionally, farmers have substantial capital locked into immovable land, buildings, and specialized machinery, limiting the ability to pivot production.

While diversification can improve long-term financial resilience, most options require extensive start-up capital and time - resources that farmers don't have. For example, diversification into cattle production may appear attractive given near-record prices, but farmers without existing herds would need to buy in at high costs, assume new risks, and wait years to see returns.

Off-farm work has become the most accessible form of diversification, yet most farmers are already relying on it. The farm economic crisis of the 1920s drove farmers to second jobs off the farm as the farm could no longer support their families. Today, farmers face another farm financial crisis while 96% of farm households already have off-farm income accounting for 80% of their total income, and nearly two-thirds maintain off-farm jobs.

Majority of Farmers Work Off-Farm

Off-farm jobs already support farm households.



- **95% of farm households have off-farm income**
- **Off-farm income makes up 80% of household income for family farms**
- **Nearly two-thirds of farmers maintain off-farm jobs already**

Source: USDA Census Data, ERS, ARMS, NCGA Calculations

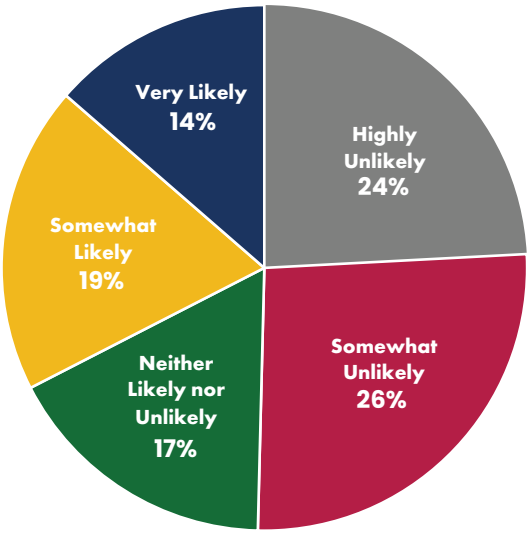
Real Farm Perspective:

About one-third of the 1,000 corn growers surveyed believe the next generation could succeed on their farm without off-farm income, counterbalancing the two-thirds currently working off-farm. However, only 14% think it's very likely the next generation could do so without outside income.

Off-farm Income Important

Growing need for off-farm income as factor for farm success.

Question: How likely is the next generation on your farm to be financially successful without non-farm sources of income?



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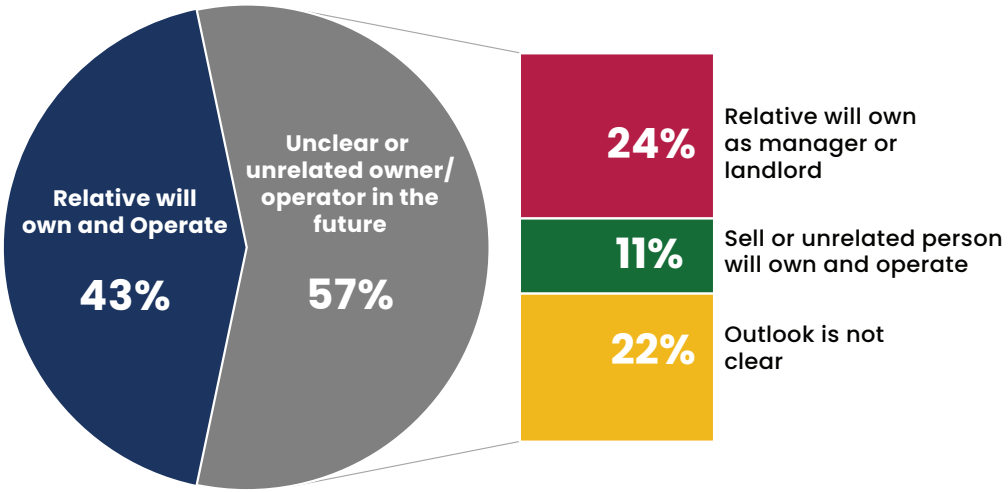
Young and beginning producers are already working off-farm at even higher rates—79% and 76% respectively—and current economic conditions could drive these numbers higher. Balancing farming, multiple jobs, and family responsibilities places significant strain on younger producers and heightens the risk to the future of family farms.

Real Farm Perspective:

Only 43% of the over 1,000 corn growers surveyed have a relative who will continue to own and operate their farm after them, leaving substantial uncertainty facing agriculture and rural America in the coming decades.

Uncertainty Facing Next Generation of Farms

57% of farmers have unclear outlook for generational succession.



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Taken together, these findings raise a critical question in a high-cost-of-entry, low-return environment: who will farm in the future? Without meaningful structural change in U.S. agriculture, this points toward continued consolidation, with fewer farms operating at larger scale, and a narrowing path forward for the next generation.

Global Competitiveness Grows, Keep Ag in America

The United States' long-standing status as the premier "breadbasket of the world" is increasingly under pressure as production expands in other countries. The U.S. share of global agricultural production value fell from 14.5% in 1961 to 8.5% in 2024, while China (27.9%) and India (11.4%) now lead. Although the U.S. remains the world's largest agricultural exporter by value (second only to the EU when aggregated), its competitive position is eroding. Brazil, in particular, has emerged as both a major export competitor and a nation with expansive land available for future production growth.

The U.S. has a high standard for agricultural production that is unparalleled amongst competitors—producing a premium product, but at a higher cost—especially when our competitors don't enforce the same rules.

Labor standards are a clear example: U.S. farm labor protections raise costs, while producers in other major agricultural nations often benefit from lower labor expenses and fewer worker protections.

Regulatory requirements also create competitive challenges. The U.S. regulatory system for biotechnology products, pesticide registration, and other inputs is necessary to ensure safety, but adds years to the length of time it takes a new product to reach the market. Government approval processes can be costly and time-consuming for bringing new and improved inputs to the U.S. market. In contrast, competitors such as Brazil are approving new traits as a faster pace, enabling their farmers to access innovations more quickly.

Land costs further widen the gap. Prime cropland in Brazil, for example, costs roughly one-third to one-half as much as comparable U.S. land, giving foreign producers a major fixed-cost advantage.

Government policies supporting domestic demand also differ sharply. Brazil's automatic 30% ethanol blend rate is driving strong internal demand, while U.S. farmers have desperately struggled for years – and continue to fight – to reach a voluntary 15% blend. While politics get in the way of allowing demand markets to function in the U.S., competitor nations' demand grows unchecked.

As global competition intensifies and new value-added markets—such as sustainable aviation and maritime fuels—emerge, the U.S. must compete effectively to capture these market opportunities. At the same time, global agricultural trade policy, including the development of carbon accounting frameworks, are increasingly being shaped in ways that favor, or are more lenient toward, South American competitors. U.S. agricultural production cannot continue to grow if American farmers are excluded from the same demand opportunities available to their primary competitors.

Many of these pressures mirror the forces that contributed to the decline of U.S. manufacturing over the last fifty years: lower wages, fewer regulations, lower operating costs, and stronger government market support elsewhere. Without urgent action, the U.S. risks surrendering its leadership in global agriculture.

Conclusion

Corn growers—and American agriculture more broadly—are confronting headwinds rarely seen in the nation's 250-year history. The U.S. risks losing another generation of farmers, not for lack of interest, but because market forces are driving an inability to be successful in a profession they desperately wish to pursue.

A loss of farmers is a loss to America. As farm numbers decline, rural populations and economies continue to dwindle, and the production of essential food, fuel and fiber is placed in the hands of a decreasing number of individuals. This is an unsustainable path for the long-term viability of our nation's agriculture industry.

Corn farmers need a different type of support from Congress. While ad hoc assistance can help during periods of financial stress, it does not create a durable path to success. Farmers need policies and a regulatory environment that delivers consistent, predictable opportunities for demand and profitability—policies that expand access to emerging markets, strengthen international trade relationships, and ensure U.S. producers are not placed at a competitive disadvantage globally.

At the same time, the National Corn Growers Association recognizes the increasing challenge presented by a federal governing body that passes fewer and fewer pieces of legislation every year. Corn farmers will continue to advocate for policy solutions that enable access to future demand markets, though federal policies that drive demand for U.S. corn have been and will continue to be hard to pursue.

For this reason, NCGA is increasing its pursuit of new market opportunities beyond traditional policy pathways, with a renewed focus on corn's role in the bioeconomy—where renewable corn-based solutions can replace fossil fuels in everyday products. A silver bullet for increasing corn demand does not exist; yet, with many smaller, but important, opportunities on the horizon, corn farmers can diversify their demand sources for years to come. NCGA will be sharing more on the outlook for these opportunities in the coming months.

Corn has been an essential part of the American story, for every one of its 250 years. Farmers today want that legacy to endure for the next 250 years. It's a pivotal moment in time to ensure corn remains America's Crop for America's Future.