

Fostering Community Well-Being in Farming Practices

Potential Benefits for Farmers and Agricultural Communities

Jean R. Francois

July 5, 2023

A word to start!

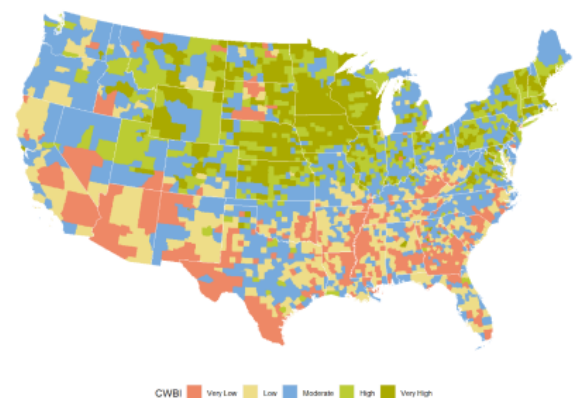
This story map is devoted to you, Farmers! As stewards of the land, you occupy an important position in the ongoing pursuit of sustainability for our communities, nation, and the world. We express our gratitude for recognizing farming as more than just a business but as an integral part of the larger community, fostering interconnections and improving well-being.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of agriculture's critical role in promoting the well-being of both you [farmers] and your communities, which is a crucial outcome of many sustainability efforts. The role of agricultural producers extends beyond fields to support their livelihood and the well-being of their communities and their nation. Producers' decisions and actions have, therefore, a profound and lasting impact on the well-being of their communities. This story map explores this interconnection of farming and community well-being and highlights key management decisions that farmers are consciously considering in their decision-making process. It also describes some potential benefits this agriculture–community relationship might have on both farm profitability and the overall well-being of agricultural communities. Through interviews with agricultural stakeholders, we gain valuable insights into practices and approaches that farmers across various regions in the U.S. are embracing to create a positive and sustainable impact on their communities.



Understanding Community Well-Being

To embark on this journey, it is essential to understand what community well-being entails. Community well-being encompasses a range of social, economic, and environmental factors that contribute to a community's overall quality of life and sustainability. It contains aspects such as access to essential services, economic opportunities, social



Community well-being across U.S. counties: A measure constructed with variables capturing basic material needs, health,

cohesion, environmental stewardship, and public health. Sometimes, some of

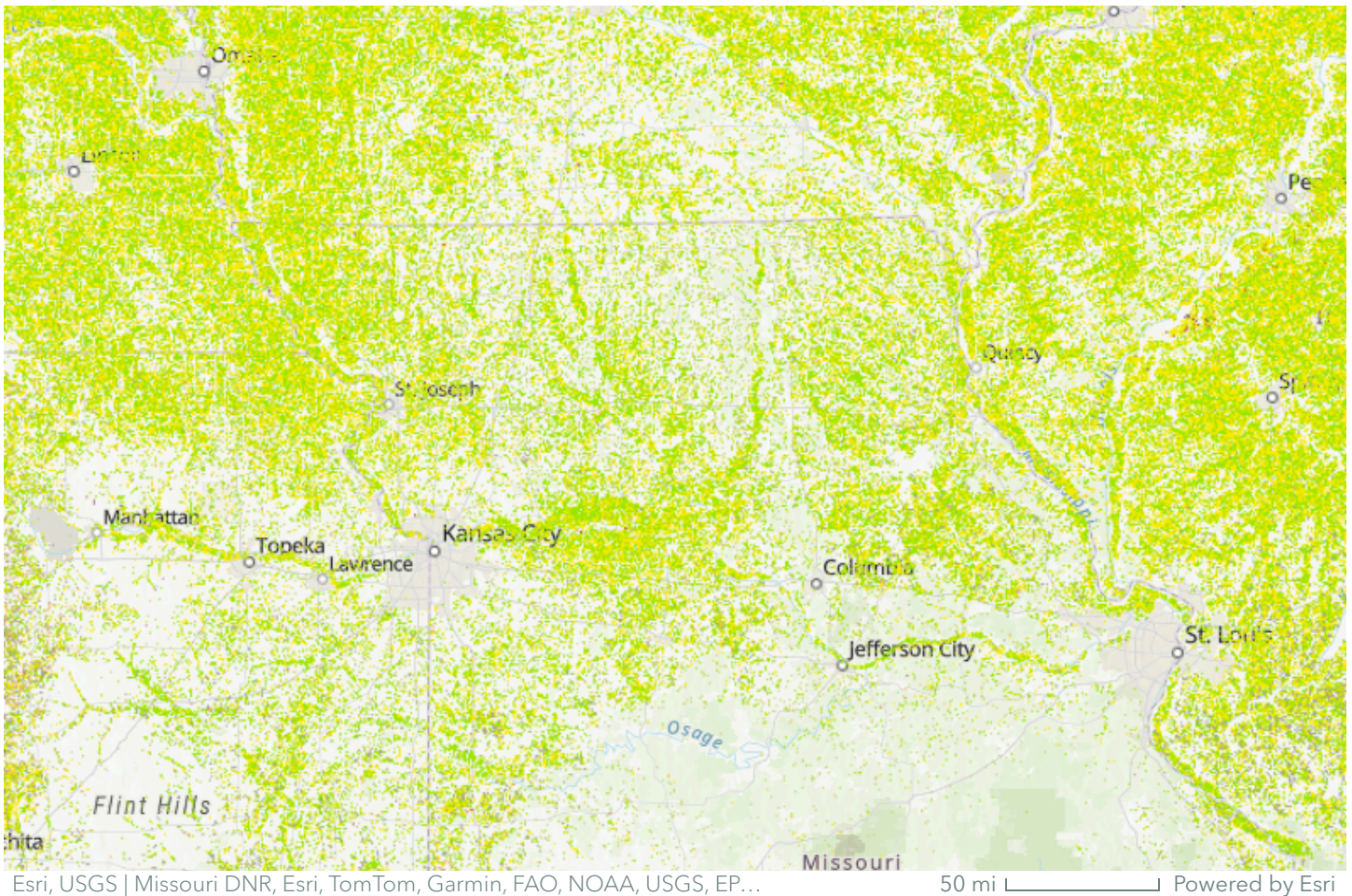
education, opportunity, community, and security ["Manuscript in preparation"]

these factors are recognized as issues or problems that require special attention and action to be resolved. Issues do not exist in a vacuum and are often the result of a complex interplay of various factors and circumstances that emerge from the organization of our systems. For example, agricultural systems perform essential functions vital to human life, including producing food, bioenergy, fiber, forage, and pharmaceuticals. However, as shaped by human management, agricultural systems have been linked to many social, economic, and environmental concerns, including some public health concerns, a decline in population and community vitality, and a deterioration of civic engagement. We delve into some of these issues/concerns in interviews with many farmers across several U.S. regions to see how they are considering the broader landscape/community when making farming decisions. By consciously assessing their management decisions and their potential impacts, agricultural producers can align their decision-making processes with the broader goals of creating thriving and resilient communities.

Integrating Community Well-Being into Farm-Based Decision-Making: Insights from Farmer Interviews

Agricultural producers can enhance the well-being of the broader community by integrating community concerns into farm-based management decisions. By prioritizing the well-being of their communities, farmers can create a positive impact that extends beyond their own operations. Based on discussions with farmers, we found inspiring examples of farmers who have successfully integrated community concerns into their management decisions. These community

concerns' considerations in decision-making showcase farmers' commitment to the well-being of their neighbors.



Prioritizing Community Health

One significant consideration expressed by farmers was the avoidance of using certain types of chemicals that may negatively impact the surrounding community. For instance, farmers mentioned their conscientious decision to refrain from using dicamba, an herbicide known for its potential to damage neighboring crops and compromise human health. A Kansans farmer mentioned:

"I've tried to avoid using dicamba as much as possible because just watching what that stuff did to other plants, it really made open my eyes to

how long that stuff stays in the air. And if you live out here, I mean, people are breathing it in, and they don't even know."

This conscious choice reflected their commitment to minimizing the risk of detrimental effects on the environment, neighboring farms, and the health of community residents.

Sustainable Resource Management

Another consideration highlighted by participants was the reduction of resource usage, particularly water. For example, producers acknowledged the importance of responsible resource management and expressed their efforts to consider community needs, particularly in difficult times like dry seasons. Another Kansans farmer expressed:

"Sometimes, I don't like watering because we have three pivots here, and they all come out of the [Kansas] River, and our local community actually pumps out the river for the water in the community. So, sometimes it's hard to pump water when it's dry like this, knowing that the community is going to have to use the same water, you know. We haven't ever had to stop. But sometimes, yeah."

By minimizing water usage, they aimed to contribute to the overall sustainability of the community and preserve this vital resource for both agricultural and non-agricultural purposes.

Supporting the Local Economy

Supporting the local economy and fostering community relationships emerged as another aspect of community concerns in farming decisions. Some farmers preferred buying agricultural inputs locally, such as seeds and fertilizers, instead of seeking external sources. Similarly, they tended to sell their products within the local market whenever possible. One farmer in Nebraska stated:

"I like to patronize the small towns and the businesses in the small towns. And I'll be honest with you; it irritates me a little bit when other people come in and gobble up all the farm ground and don't use the local facilities."

This practice, for sure, strengthened local businesses, supported the community's economic growth, and reduced transportation emissions associated with long-distance transactions.

Community Engagement and Participation

Some farmers also cited engagement in community activities and organizations as a consideration. They recognized the importance of actively participating in local groups and initiatives to keep their communities vital. By being involved, farmers sought to contribute to the community's collective efforts and work collaboratively towards shared goals. Recognizing the challenges of attracting youth to the field, a farmer in North Carolina expressed their commitment to empowering the next generation of farmers and ensuring the sustainability of agricultural communities.:

"And the thing there is, getting young people involved in that [farming] is difficult. So, what we

are trying to do on the farm here is get my nieces and nephews, young people, involved in this. I would like for this farm to be a demonstration farm, you know, and I think it can become, as a matter of fact we built this, this was supposed to be a classroom and teach young people about agriculture."

Engagement of this nature brings numerous benefits to the community and the farming industry as a whole. It fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring that valuable farming traditions and practices are passed down to the next generation.

Potential Benefits for Farmers and Communities

Integrating community well-being into farm-based decision-making brings numerous advantages for farmers and their communities. By prioritizing community concerns and incorporating them into their management decisions, farmers can unlock a range of positive outcomes that contribute to farm profitability and their communities' overall well-being. This section is inspired by the interview discussions and the May 2023 SARE bulletin that devoted significant attention to social sustainability in agriculture. Far from being an exhaustive list, consideration of community concerns in agricultural decision-making can benefit both farmers and communities in the following ways:

Enhanced Reputation and Public Relations

When farmers actively consider community well-being in their decision-making processes, their operation cultivates a positive reputation within the community and beyond. Committing to sustainable practices, worker health and safety, environmental stewardship, and community health and well-being can improve public perception of farming activities. This positive image can lead to increased support from the public, fostering stronger relationships with consumers, local businesses, and policymakers. A favorable reputation can also open doors to new market opportunities, partnerships, and collaborations that benefit farmers financially. A clear picture of this was expressed during a joint discussion with two farmers in North Carolina:



*Farmer 1: And that's what I was telling you
[Farmer 2], the more you can stay involved with*

*people in your type of industry, the better off you are. That's the reason I'm doing the *** deal because I'm trying to stay in contact all the time.*

Farmer 2: Yeah. And I don't like doing it, but that's why I'm on the board with the [crop] growers. Because when I go places, I mean, I get people to come up, and we picked up some sales just because of that. You know, just talking to people.

Market Demand and Consumer Preference

Consumer demand for sustainably produced, locally sourced agricultural products continues to grow. Farmers align themselves with these market trends and consumer preferences by integrating community well-being into their farm practices. Consumers are increasingly seeking products that are produced with consideration for worker welfare, environmental sustainability, and community impact. Farmers who demonstrate their commitment to these values may have a competitive edge in the marketplace, allowing them to command higher prices for their products and establish loyal customer relationships.

Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Engaging with the broader community and actively addressing community concerns fosters collaboration and knowledge sharing among farmers and other stakeholders. By building solid relationships with community members, peers, and fellow farmers, farmers gain access to valuable resources, expertise, and support networks. Collaborative initiatives, such as cooperative farming ventures, shared equipment and infrastructure, and community-supported agriculture programs, can help farmers reduce costs, increase efficiency,

and expand their market reach. Through these collaborative efforts, farmers and the broader community can work together towards common goals, sharing ideas and innovations that benefit both parties.

Enhanced Farmer Well-Being

Integrating community well-being into farm-based decision-making can also positively impact the well-being of farmers. By fostering a sense of belonging and community support, farmers experience improved mental well-being, reduced feelings of isolation, and increased job satisfaction. Engaging with the broader community and knowing that their farming practices contribute to the overall well-being of their neighbors can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment. This holistic approach to farming, which prioritizes economic outcomes and community and personal well-being, creates a more rewarding and sustainable farming experience.

Let's get to it!

Embracing the concept of community well-being in farming practices creates a lasting and positive impact on agricultural communities. The key management decisions explored in this story map not only create opportunities for farmers but also foster a sustainable and prosperous future for communities. Farmers can build a thriving and sustainable farming operation that catalyzes positive change by stewarding their resources, engaging with the community, and continuously striving for improvement.

We encourage farmers to seek support from local agricultural extension services, farmer networks, and community organizations as they embark on this journey. Together, let us cultivate a future where farming practices prioritize the

prosperity of farms and communities, leaving a legacy of sustainable agriculture for generations to come.

Additional Resources

For further insights into the importance of social sustainability in agriculture, we recommend accessing the May 2023 SARE bulletin, "Resilient Farmers, Ranchers and Communities." You can download or order a free print copy from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) website at <https://www.sare.org/social> or by calling (301) 779-1007.



About this story

This story was created by Jean R. Francois (Ph.D. student, Kansas State University) under the supervision of Dr. Katherine Nelson from the [SCALes \(Sustainability of Communities and Agricultural Landscapes\)](#) lab at Kansas State University. We thank Dr. Emily Burchfield, Dr. Jeremy Cowan, Dr.

Andrea Rissing, Amariah Fischer, and all the farmers who voluntarily participated in the discussions. The content for this story comes from research studies funded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture [Grant No. 2020-67019-31157] and under agreement number 2021-38640-34714 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number GNC22-348. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

USA Cropland

USDA NASS Cropland Data
Layer

Photos

K-State Research and
Extension, unless
otherwise noted