



## Perspectives on Farmers and Farming from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey

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In the fourth wave of the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey, we added a series of questions intended to measure the public’s perspectives on farmers and farming (*farmdoc daily*, [March 9, 2023](#)). Congress is expected to reauthorize the Farm Bill in 2023 and such perspectives offer useful data points. For farm policy, it is informative to understand the public’s knowledge about agricultural production as well as their sentiment toward different types of farming operations; in this post, we specifically focus on differences by farm size.

### Background

The Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey is conducted quarterly to measure public perception of agricultural and food issues. The survey is conducted online with approximately 1,000 U.S. consumers each wave. New respondents are recruited each wave to match the U.S. population in terms of gender, age, income, and region.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) provides definitions for farm size and types that are used in the Census of Agriculture (USDA-NASS, “Family Farms” [2017 Census of Agriculture](#)). The definitions are based on gross cash farm income (GCFI). NASS explains that GCFI includes crop and livestock sales, fees for delivering commodities under production contracts, as well as direct federal payments and other farm-related income. We used these definitions and types for the survey questions and the discussion that follows. For additional perspective, USDA’s Economic Research Service also provides a glossary for farms and farm households (USDA-ERS, *Glossary*, [December 1, 2022](#)). Specifically, the definitions used were:

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Figure 1. Farm Size Definitions

## FARM SIZE DEFINITIONS

Source: USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture

**SMALL FAMILY FARMS**  
Gross Cash Farm Income is less than \$350,000

**MIDSIZE FAMILY FARMS**  
Gross Cash Farm Income is from \$350,000 to \$999,999

**LARGE FAMILY FARMS**  
Gross Cash Farm Income is more than \$1,000,000

**\*NON-FAMILY FARMS**  
Producer & persons related to the produce do not own a majority of the business  
No Gross Cash Farm Income thresholds

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In addition, NASS defines a non-family farm as those where the producer and the persons related to the produce do not own a majority of the business. There is no GCFI threshold for this category, however. We do not include this category in our survey questions as there is no natural basis of comparison with GCFI values for the other farm size categories. If we consider the entire population of farms (family and non-family operations), family farms account for 97.8% of all U.S. farms, while only 2.2% are non-family farms (USDA-ERS, [Farming and Farm Income](#)).

### Farm Size

The discussion that follows will report the findings from the Gardner survey and compare those findings to the information reported by USDA in the 2017 Census of Agriculture. We begin by looking at respondents' perceptions about the size of family farms and how many farms were in each category. We asked respondents to estimate the percent of U.S. farms that are in each farm size category and the responses are summarized in Table 1.

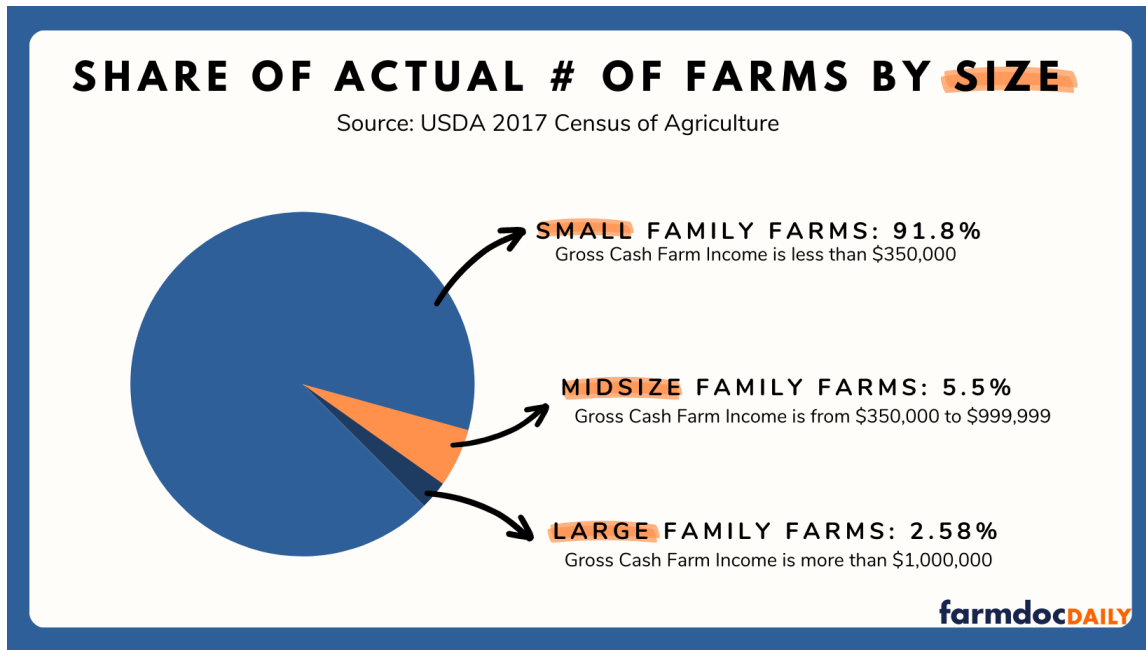
Table 1. Estimates of U.S. Farms in Each Size Category

	<i>Half or Less of All Farms</i>	<i>More than Half of All Farms</i>
<i>% of respondents who estimated that small family farms are...</i>	81.4%	18.5%
<i>% of respondents who estimated that midsize family farms are...</i>	91.4%	8.6%
<i>% of respondents who estimated that large family farms are...</i>	71.7%	28.3%

Figure 2 illustrates the actual distribution of U.S. family farms by size. In the 2017 Census of Agriculture, there were 1,959,335 family farms, of which 1,798,439 (92%) were small family farms, 108,304 (5.5%)

were midsized and large family farms were almost 2.7% (52,592) of total family farms. The perspectives of survey respondents differed substantially from the current state of American agriculture. Over 80% of respondents estimated that small family farms account for half or less of all U.S. farms, when those farms make up more than 90% of all farms. By comparison, 28.3% of respondents estimated that large family farms make up more than half of all U.S. farms, when those farms constitute less than 3% of all U.S. family farms.

**Figure 2. Share of Farms by Type (Source: USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture)**



**Farm Production**

We next wanted to gauge what consumers perceive to be the contribution to agricultural production by size of farm, asking which type of farm contributed the most to farm production. In general, respondents thought that midsized farms contributed the most to U.S. agricultural production, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Estimates of Each Farm Size’s Contribution to U.S. Agricultural Production**

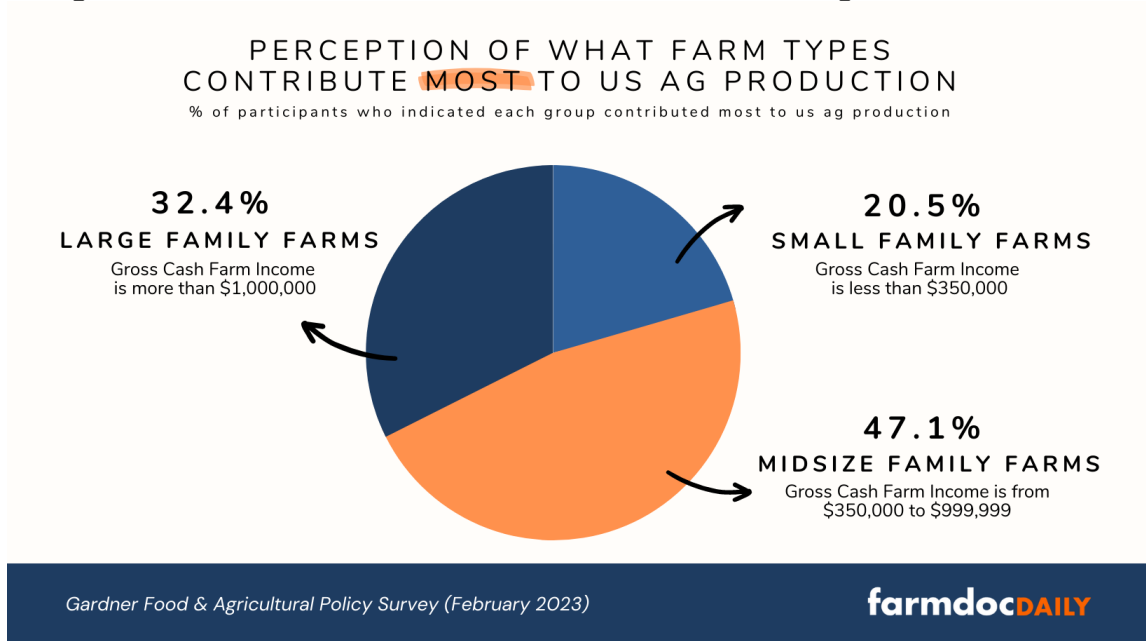
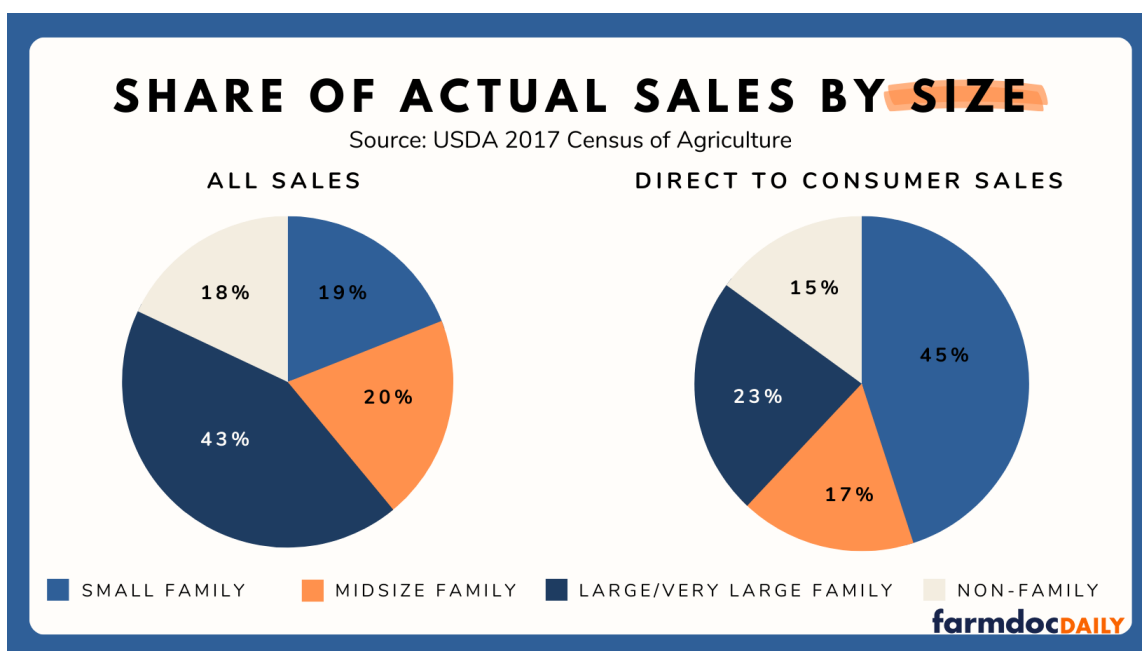


Figure 4 reports on the *actual* distribution of agricultural sales by farm size; the data include both total agricultural sales and direct-to-consumer sales. In the 2017 Census of Agriculture, about 19% of total agricultural sales were from small family farms and 20% from mid-sized family farms, while large (including very large) family farms accounted for 43%; non-family or corporate farms accounted for 18% of total production. USDA also reported agricultural sales directly to consumers: 45% of direct-to-consumer sales were by small family farms and 17% from mid-sized family farms. Large and very large family farms made up 23% and non-family farms contributed 15%. Note, however, that while small family farms comprise a much larger share of direct-to-consumer sales, the direct-to-consumer market is much smaller. Total agricultural sales are valued at \$389 billion while the direct-to-consumer sales are a small component at \$2.8 billion.

Given that small family farms account for the largest share of direct-to-consumer sales, this may play a role in shaping public perceptions about their contributions overall. It is possible that this more common direct engagement with small farmers may be driving perceptions about modern farming. Additional research is needed to explore these results.

**Figure 4. Share of Actual Agricultural Sales by Farm Type**  
(Source: USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture)

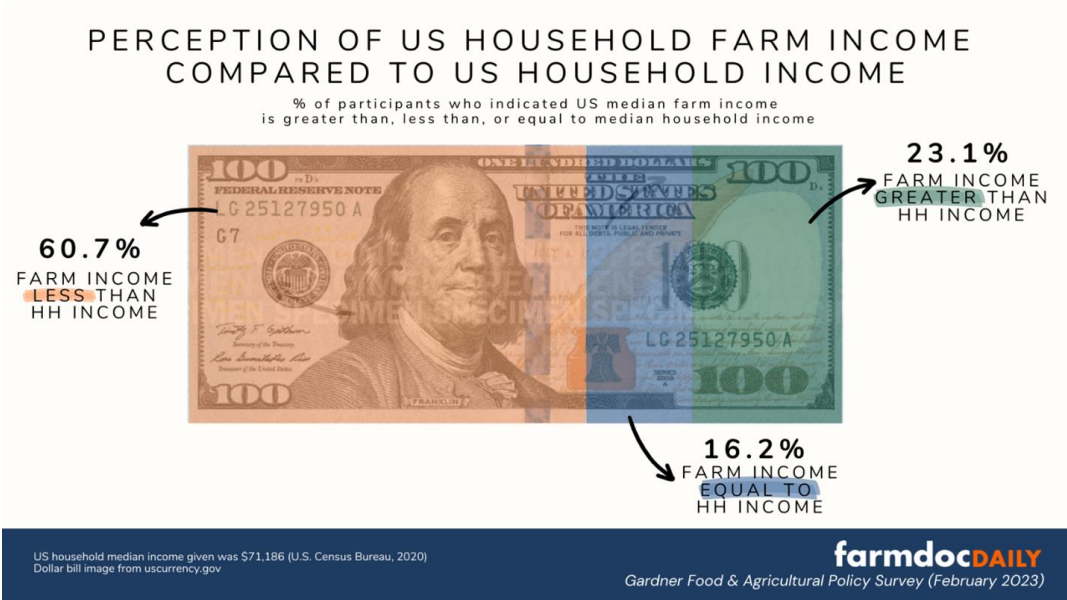


### Farm Income

We also asked participants whether they thought median farm income was higher, lower, or about the same as median U.S. household income. Participants were told that the 2020 median household income was \$71,186 for the sake of reference. Survey respondents overwhelmingly thought that median farm income was less than median U.S. household income. Figure 5 illustrates the responses.

In 2021, the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) reported that the median household income among all farm households was \$92,239. ERS also reported that income from farming in 2021 was \$185,593 for those households operating commercial farms and that the median total income in 2021 for commercial farming households was \$261,992; by comparison, ERS also reported that the median household income for those operating large-scale farms earned \$486,475 in 2021 (USDA-ERS, [December 1, 2022; Farming and Farm Income](#)). This underscores a substantial disconnect in public perception of farm income and actual farm income.

**Figure 5. Proportion of Participants Who Indicated They Thought the Median U.S. Farm Household Income Was Greater Than, Less Than, or Equal to Median U.S. Household Income**

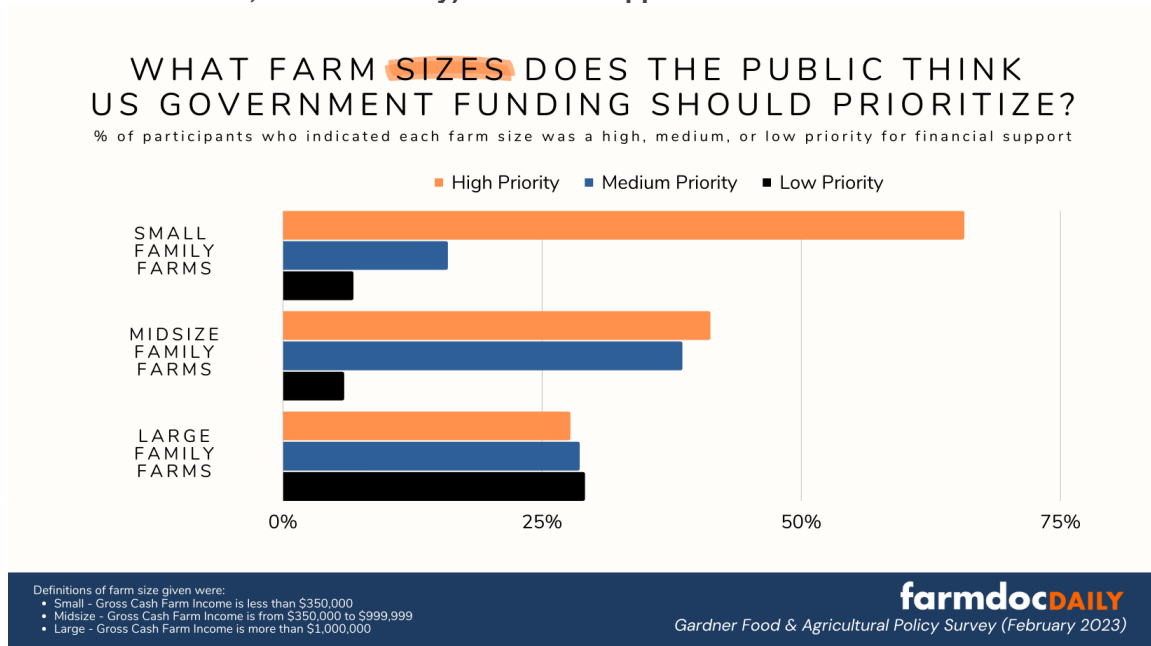


One aspect of income that the survey respondents may not have considered for farms is that their total household income can be made up of both farm and off-farm sources. When looking at farms by size, small family farms earn about half of their income from farm sources and the other half from off-farm sources (USDA-ERS, [Farming and Farm Income](#)). Midsize and large family farms earn much larger shares of their income from farm sources.

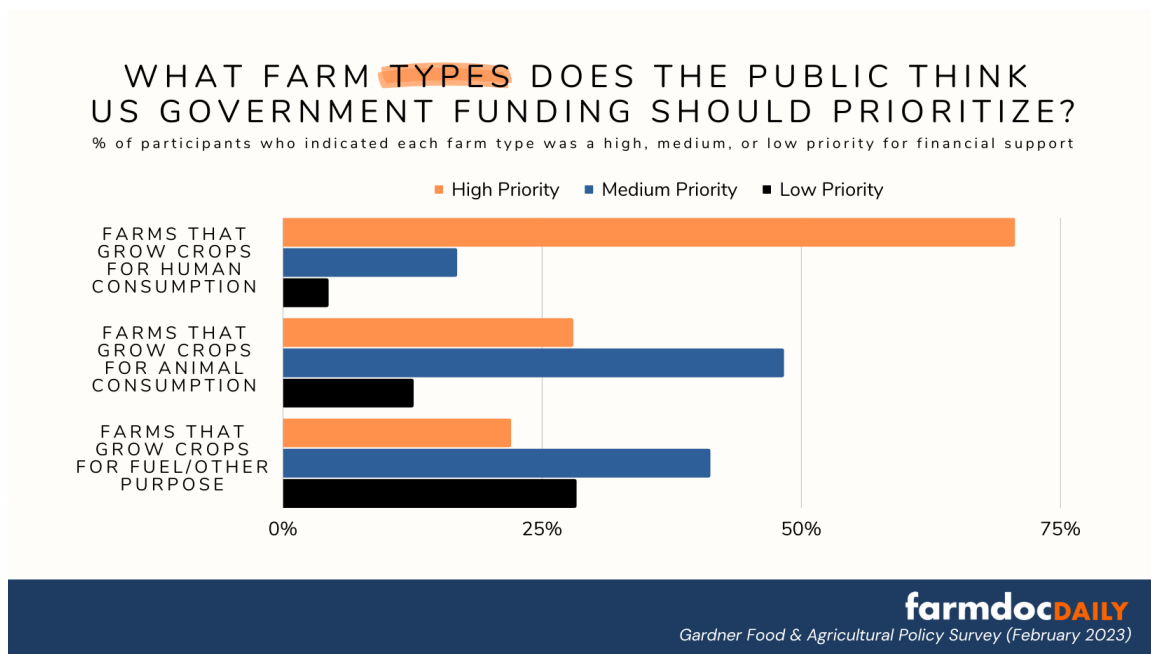
**Policy Priorities by Farm Size and Production**

Understanding public perceptions about farmers and farming may have important implications for farm policy. At its most basic, farm policy provides direct assistance to a subset of American farmers. From previous surveys, we have found that respondents are more supportive of policies that help farmers in response to natural disasters or managing risk through crop insurance than when prices are low; we have also found that close to 60% support providing income to farmers (*farmdoc daily*, [March 9, 2023](#)). To some degree, that support for helping farmers depends on the public’s perceptions about such matters as farm size and incomes, as well as contribution to the supply of food. To begin to test this, we asked participants about what types of farms U.S. government funding should prioritize. In particular, we asked about farm size (small, midsize, large) and farm production type (crops produced for human consumption, animal consumption, or fuel/other purposes). Figure 6 shows the results for farm size and Figure 7 shows the results for production type.

**Figure 6. Proportion of Participants Who Indicated the Government Should Prioritize (High, Medium, or Low Priority) Financial Support for Different Farms Sizes**



**Figure 7. Proportion of Participants Who Indicated the Government Should Prioritize (High, Medium, or Low Priority) Financial Support for Different Farms Types**



Participants' highest priorities were for small family farms and farms that grow food directly consumed by humans. Current farm policies, however, increasingly provide assistance to the largest farms and those operated by households with higher incomes (McFadden and Hoppe, [November 2017](#)). The views of respondents in the Gardner survey may well point to a disconnect between farm policies and public priorities. If so, the disconnect presents real risk for farm policies.

## Concluding Thoughts

Results from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey suggest a disconnect between the current state of farming and the perceptions of the average U.S. consumer about the distribution of farms in the U.S., as well as key contributors to agricultural production. Respondents think that small family farms account for a much smaller share of U.S. farms than they actually do. Further, respondents thought that midsized family farms account for the majority of agricultural production, when in reality large family farms contribute the most. This result may be partially explained by the large role smaller farms play in direct-to-consumer sales. Respondents also overestimated the number of large farms and underestimated their contribution to production. Perhaps most telling from the survey was respondents' perception that the median farm household income is less than the median U.S. household income (even though the reverse is true). Public perception about who farmers are—their size, their productivity, and their incomes—are likely to impact public support for farm policy as well. That support might also depend on the types of policies and the reasons for providing assistance to farmers.

Here, we discuss public priorities for government support by farm size and production type (see Figures 6 and 7). We note that federal policies for farmers in the Farm Bill are at risk of being out-of-step with public opinion. Respondents prioritized support for small family farms and for those that grow food for human consumption, while federal programs provide the most support to farms that grow commodities not consumed by humans directly and federal farm programs tend provide the most support to the largest farms and those with relatively high incomes (see, McFadden and Hoppe, [November 2017](#)). From these initial perspectives on farmers and farming, the next article will explore in more detail specific policy questions about supporting farmers.

## References

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