



## Age of US Farmers: Is the Wrong Issue Being Addressed?

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The older age of US farmers remains a topic of interest (Kurtzleben; Stone). This article thus revisits the *farmdoc daily* article of [October 23, 2013](#), updating it with *2017 Census of Agriculture* data. It is also a condensed, more focused version of a forthcoming article in the *Handbook of Rural Aging*. A key point is that US policy should focus more on helping older farmers remain active, high performers.

**Average Age:** As of the *2017 Census of Agriculture*, US farmers averaged 57.5, 9.7 years older than the first average age reported in the *1945 Census*. The 2017 average is 1.2 years older than in the *2012 Census* (See Data Note 1). Only the *1978 Census* had an average age that was more than 0.1 years younger than the prior census (50.3 vs. 51.7 in the *1974 Census*).

**Age Distribution:** In the *2017 Census*, almost as many US farmer are 65 and older as younger than 55 (34% vs. 37%) In contrast, only 14% of self-employed US workers in nonagricultural businesses are 65 or older (US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Economic Research Service (ERS)).

**Involvement in Farm Production:** Farmers 65 and older generate 23% of all US farm sales (USDA, ERS). Based on a *2017 Census* question, their involvement in farm production is similar to that of younger farmers with the possible exception of livestock: 87% of both age groups are involved in day-to-day operation of a farm, 74% of farmers 65 and older make cropping and land use decisions vs. 75% for younger farmers, and 58% of farmers 65 and older make livestock decisions vs. 64% for younger farmers.

**Policy Observations:** Older farmers are as involved in farming as younger farmers, with the possible exception of livestock farming. This conclusion, plus the observations that (a) US farmers will likely remain older than the average American for the foreseeable future and (b) most older farmers the author knows intend to farm as long as possible, suggest the US should focus more on helping older farmers remain active, highly productive members of a profession they love.

**Data Note 1:** Attributes were collected for up to 4 operators per farm in the *2017 Census* vs. 3 operators per farm in the *2012 Census*. In the *2017 Census*, principal farm operators averaged 58.6 vs. 52.8 for other operators. Thus, the change in survey methodology likely dampened the increase in average age.

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