



Perspectives, Preferences, & Priorities for Farm Payments: Results from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey

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For the potential farm bill reauthorization debate, we have sought to gain perspectives on the priorities and preferences of the general public through the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey, including with respect to farmers and farm support programs. We asked a series of questions to measure support based on different farm sizes and respondents’ self-identified political views. Previously we reported that respondents prioritized policies that supported small farms and those that provide food for humans (*farmdoc daily*, [March 30, 2023](#)). In this article, we further explore respondents’ perspectives, preferences, and priorities regarding farm support.

Survey 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 US consumers each wave. New respondents are recruited each wave to match the US population in terms of gender, age, income, and region.

Current Allocation of Funding by Farm Size

To provide context for participants in the survey, we informed them of the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) definitions for farm size and types, which is used in the Census of Agriculture (USDA-NASS, “Family Farms” [2017 Census of Agriculture](#)). The definitions are based on gross cash farm income (GCFI); to be categorized as a small family farm, gross cash farm income must be less than \$350,000 (see Figure 1). GCFI includes crop and livestock sales, fees for delivering commodities under production contracts, as well as direct federal payments and other farm-related income.

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Figure 1. Farm Size Definitions

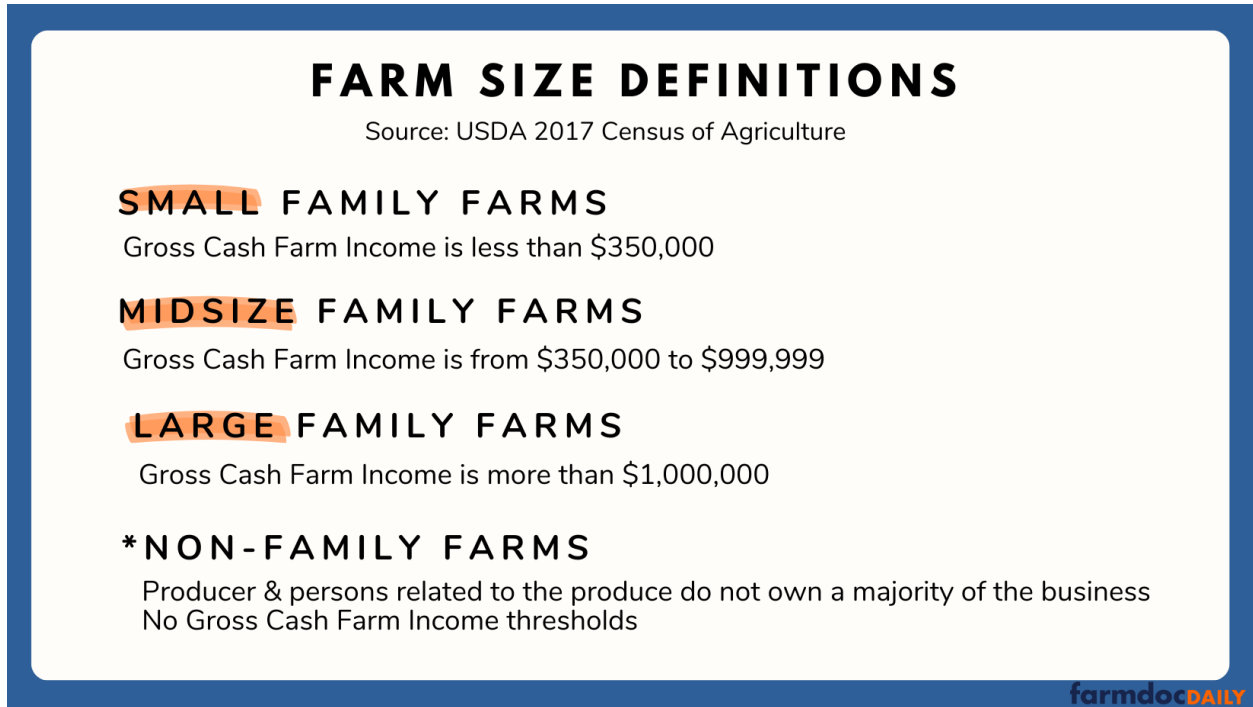
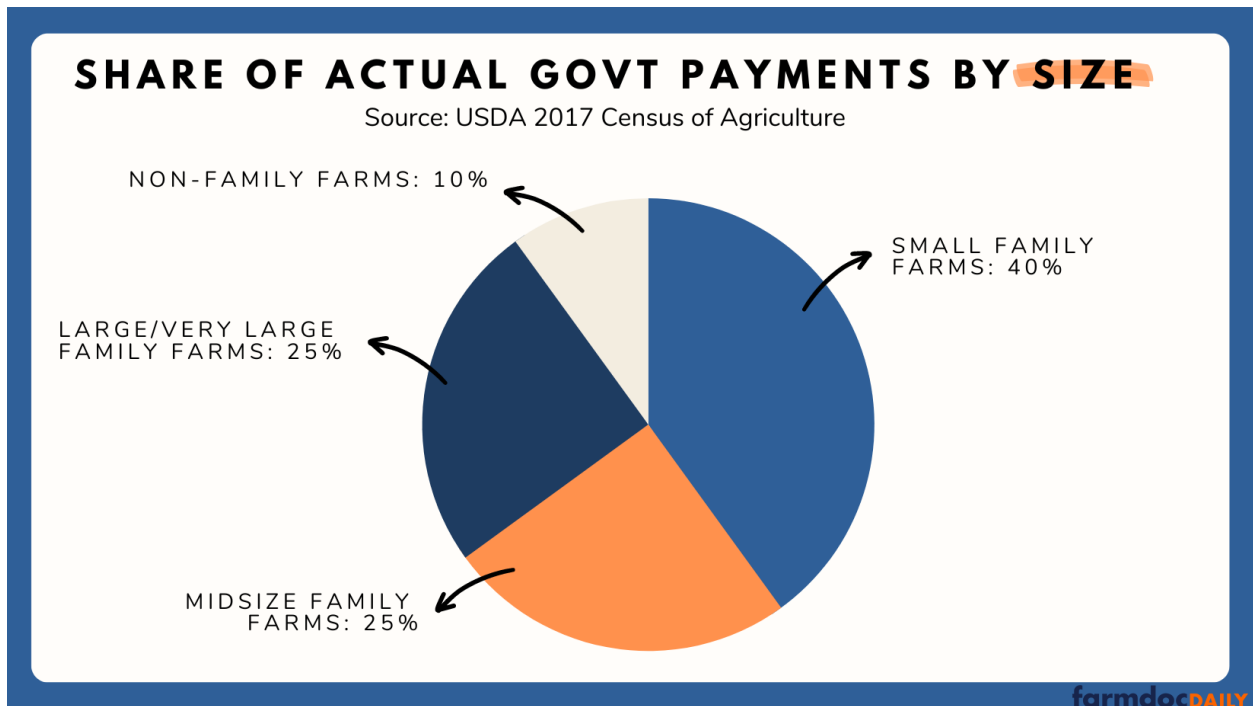


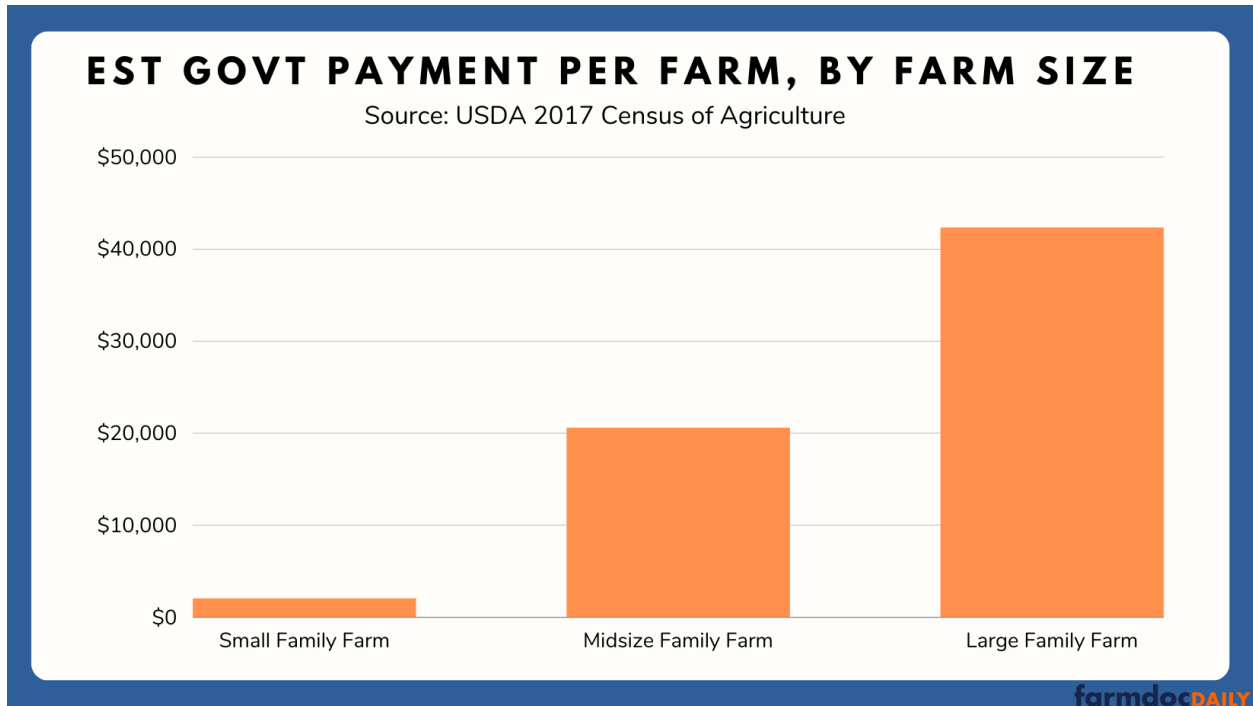
Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of government payments by farm size according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Small family farms received 40% of the total amount of government payments (\$8.9 billion), while midsize family farms received 25%, and large family farms (large and very large) received 25%. Non-family farms, which we do not explore in detail here, received 10% (USDA-NASS, "Family Farms" 2017 Census of Agriculture).

Figure 2. Share of Government Payments across Farm Size



The allocation of total government payments needs further context because, as the Census of Agriculture reports, over 90% of all family farms fit within the small family farm category. Thus, Figure 3 divides the estimated share of payments by the total family farms reported for each size. The result is a different picture; while small family farmers receive the largest portion of the total payments (40%), they receive the smallest amount per family farm. By comparison, the large and very large farms receive 25% of the total payments but constitute less than 3% of the total family farms; these farms receive much larger payments per family farm.

Figure 3. Government Payment per Family Farm by Size

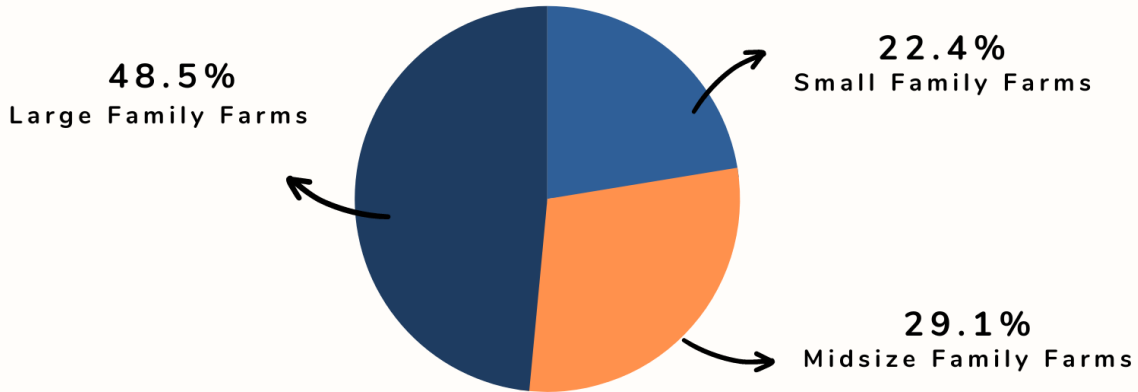


Public Perception of Funding by Farm Size

To gauge public understanding of federal payment allocation across farm size, we asked participants which type of farm they thought received the *most* in federal payments. We find that participants thought that most payments, nearly 50%, went to the largest farms. The results are illustrated in Figure 4. Comparing this perception to actual allocation (see Figure 2), survey respondents overestimate the share of funding allocated to large family farms and underestimate the share of funding allocation to small family farms. Compared to the payments per family farm, however, respondents are likely closer to the reality in which the largest family farms receive the largest payments. Respondents' perspectives are also in line with USDA research findings about the trends in payment and program distribution (McFadden and Hoppe, [November 2017](#)).

Figure 4. Percent of Participants Who Indicated They Thought Each Farm Size Received MOST in Government Support Payments

What type of farm does the public think receives the most in government payments?



This perception did not differ much by political ideology. In Table 1, we show the proportion of participants who believe each farm size receives the most in government funding. We find that across political ideologies, over 47% of participants think large family farms receive the most funding.

Table 1. Percent of Participants Who Indicated They Thought Each Farm Size Received MOST in Government Support Payments, across Participants' Political Ideologies

	Small Family Farms	Midsize Family Farms	Large Family Farms
% of Liberal Participants	25.0%	26.9%	48.1%
% of Moderate Participants	19.5%	30.8%	49.6%
% of Conservative Participants	23.8%	28.9%	47.3%

To gain further perspective on matters of federal assistance to farmers, we asked respondents about their perceptions on the current distribution of federal funding to farms of different sizes. Figure 5 illustrates the responses. We find that 59.0% of participants indicated they thought small family farms received too little, whereas 47.2% indicated thought large family farms received too much.

Figure 5. Percent of Participants Who Indicated They Thought Each Farm Size Received Too Little, the Right Amount, or Too Much Government Funding

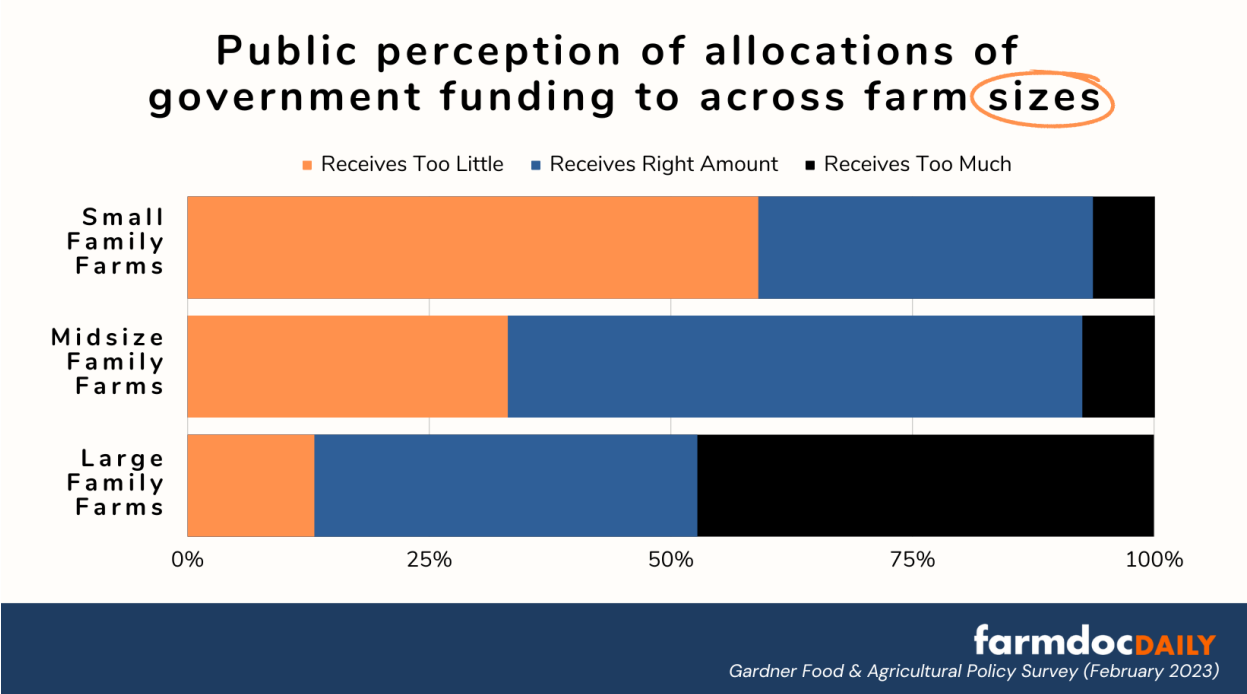


Table 2 breaks down the responses by political views. Across political ideologies, most respondents felt that small farms receive too little across all three political categories, with moderates returning the highest level of this perspective at almost 61%.

Table 2. Percent of Participants Who Indicated They Thought Each Farm Size Received MOST in Government Support Payments, across Participants' Political Ideologies

Small family farms	% of Liberal Participants	% of Moderate Participants	% of Conservative Participants
Receives Too Little	56.1%	60.9%	59.2%
Receives Right Amount	36.5%	34.4%	32.9%
Receives Too Much	7.4%	4.7%	7.9%
Medium Family Farms	% of Liberal Participants	% of Moderate Participants	% of Conservative Participants
Receives Too Little	30.1%	33.6%	35.5%
Receives Right Amount	62.5%	59.3%	56.2%
Receives Too Much	7.4%	7.1%	8.3%
Large Family Farms	% of Liberal	% of Moderate	% of Conservative

	Participants	Participants	Participants
Receives Too Little	12.2%	12.7%	14.9%
Receives Right Amount	37.3%	43.5%	36.2%
Receives Too Much	50.5%	43.8%	48.9%

Public Perception of Payment Limits by Farm Size

One of the more contentious, but persistent, farm policy debates in a farm bill reauthorization effort is the matter of payment limits. Currently, the direct farm program payments for the major crops have a limit of \$125,000 per individual farmer per year; farmers with peanut base acres can receive up to \$125,000 on peanut payments in addition to the limits on payments for other crops (USDA-FSA, Fact Sheet, [May 2019](#)). In practice, the payment limits can, and often are, doubled through a spouse. Farms can also increase the payment limits by adding other family members to the farming operation, as well as through setting up general partnerships and limited liability companies.

In the survey, we asked participants to indicate the maximum amount of government support that an individual farmer should be able to receive in a given year, from \$0 to \$250,000. We do not expect the public to be able to provide informed about specific payment levels or limits, however, the responses are likely to be informative about their priorities and what they perceive as reasonable. We find that respondents' averages were close on payment limits, settling just above the statutory limit of \$125,000, as indicated in Table 3. It may be important to consider these results in conjunction with other views above, such as the views that large family farms receive the most in payments and that respondents tend to think those farms receive too much in payments. The results in Table 3 also reinforce the findings that the public generally favors or prioritizes assistance to smaller farms even though the differences in amounts were relatively small. On average, participants indicated small family farms should receive a maximum in payments that is \$4,484 higher than midsize farms and \$6,174 higher than large farms.

Table 3. Average Responses to “For Each Type of Farm, What Is the MAXIMUM Amount of Government Support That an Individual Farmer Should Be Able to Receive in a Given Year?” across Farm Size

	Respondents' Average Maximum
Small Family Farms	\$139,823
Medium Family Farms	\$135,339
Large Family Farms	\$133,649

We explore average maximums across political ideology (see Table 4), and there were some differences. Liberal participants are comfortable with higher payments across the three farm sizes, while conservatives preferred lower limits. Respondents across all political ideologies supported higher payments for smaller farms than larger farms. Current policy does not distinguish by farm size in terms of the payment limit, although the limits operate in a manner that tends to impact the larger farms more.

Table 4. Average Responses to “For Each Type of Farm, What Is the MAXIMUM Amount of Government Support That an Individual Farmer Should Be Able to Receive in a Given Year?” across Farm Size, across Participants’ Political Ideologies

	Liberal Participants’ Average Maximum	Moderate Participants’ Average Maximum	Conservative Participants’ Average Maximum
Small Family Farms	\$141,311	\$145,932	\$128,776
Medium Family Farms	\$132,535	\$141,814	\$128,563
Large Family Farms	\$133,580	\$140,240	\$123,614

Concluding Thoughts

If Congress debates a farm bill in 2023, the debate is certain to include issues about federal farm assistance and whether federal farm programs are equitable, as well as aligned with public priorities. In this post, we use results from the fourth wave of the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey to gain insights on public perceptions, perspectives and priorities for federal farm support, including by size of family farms. We find that, across political ideologies, respondents tended to think that large family farms received the most in federal payments and that they received too much; respondents thought small family farms received the least and that they receive too little in government payments. By comparison, the 2017 Census of Agriculture indicates that most payments go to small family farms, but that those farms make up more than 90% of total family farms which means that the largest family farms receive more per family farm. In terms of maximum payments, respondents were close to current farm program payment limits while again indicating a preference for better assistance (e.g., higher limits) for smaller family farms and that this view was largely consistent across political views. The responses reviewed in this article add to those of the previous article, indicating public preference for better assistance to small farms (*farmdoc daily*, [March 30, 2023](#)). These findings are also consistent with previous research by Ellison, Lusk, and Briggeman (2010) that found individuals were much more likely to support subsidizing small (vs. large) family farms. For Congress, these findings are relevant perspectives for policy decisions and priorities in a farm bill debate. To the extent that farm program payments and other farm assistance favors the largest farmers, the policy risks being out-of-step with the preferences and priorities of the general public, taxpayers, and voters. Such matters may weigh upon the farm bill debate as it unfolds in Congress.

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