



THE MOOD OF AGRICULTURE

How Do You Feel About Farming?

In its second annual survey, Progressive Farmer asked you to share your opinions, experience, and philosophy on the state of farming and ranching today. You told us, warts and all, what your biggest challenges are.

Bill and Diane Hawks are spending more than \$80,000 on their conservation plan to get their Hernando, Miss., farm in compliance. Although soil conservation is a goal they both can get behind, the Hawkses do object to having to bear the total cost of regulations that are benefiting society as a whole.

Regulations: They're annoying, expensive, sometimes useless, and downright infuriating, says Bill.

"It's probably as much the uncertainty of it as it is the actual regulations," he points out. "They're continually changing the regulations."

The Hawkses aren't alone in their strong feelings on this subject. In *Progressive Farmer's* annual survey of farmers, nearly 78% of you agreed that the paperwork load is heavier than it was five years ago.

Count Leroy Baldwin among the majority.

"There's no point in having to have a permit from more than one Government agency for anything," he claims. Baldwin raises registered Angus cattle and grows hay and forage in Ocala, Fla.

"[Regulations] are going to become more and more agriculture's worst enemy, and [are] either going to put the farmer out of business or cause food prices to continue to rise."

Only a little more than 22% of you think that the Government is pro-farmer. But Baldwin, who frequently speaks to Florida and federal legislators on agricultural concerns, shares the minority opinion.

"In general, I think the Government is pro-farmer," the rancher says. "Anytime that they really hurt us, we haven't done a good job of presenting the facts to them."

Cattle producer John Van Sweden's view on agricultural policy is less flattering.

"The Government says, all right, we can't take it away from



"If all the farmers [banded] together, in two weeks how much do you think pork would [cost] in the store? Or beef or milk? I mean, they could close the country down."

Terry Burris, Unionville, Tenn.

you, but we can regulate the way you use it," says the Raton, N. Mex., rancher.

"That has the same effect as taking it away because if they take the profitability out of the operation, they in effect take the operation."

James Fleming of Enfield, N.C., also thinks that the Government has been and continues to be less than supportive.

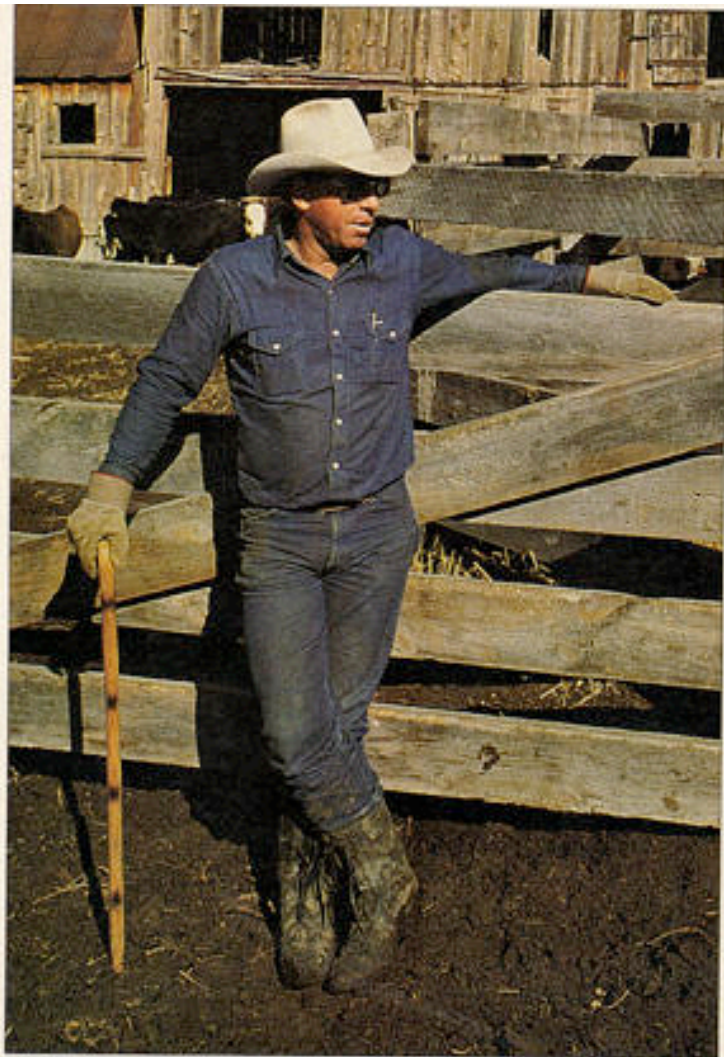
"If [the Government] had been pro-farmer, they would have tried to find a place for the production that we've got," he says.

Fleming grows peanuts, corn, cotton, forage, sorghum, and soybeans.

Terry Burris, a hog and corn producer in Unionville, Tenn., believes that the current Administration is focusing on every special interest group but farmers.

"I think [President] Clinton is listening to groups that don't contribute anything to the economy or the food system," he says. "[They] are getting all the money, and the farmers are kind of kicked away and not even recognized, sometimes."

Despite the hassles and perceived lack of support, more than 74% agree that if they had it to do over, they would plunge back into farming or ranching careers. Most, 61%, also



***"I think agriculture is the best way of life.
It's not the best way to make money."***

John Van Sweden, Raton, N. Mex.

"But now, you've got to plan every angle and base a whole lot of that on Government programs, which has been so distasteful to me. I don't want to be rewarded for being a nonproducer," he adds.

Most of you, 68.5%, are concerned that negative news stories about the products you produce may damage you financially. The folks we talked to cited the Alar/apple, Kylar/peanut incidents from several years back.

They consider them prime examples of how the media and the public's misplaced concern over a perceived problem can wreak havoc within agriculture.

About 78% of you think that farm children have more advantages than do children raised in the city. Well over half of you, however, are not sure or disagree about whether to encourage your children and grandchildren to become farmers or ranchers.

"I encouraged [my kids to go into ranching], but I didn't have to do too much," says Van Sweden, whose children are part of his sprawling New Mexican operation.

"They were always after [my son] Jason for football because he weighs about 220. But he wanted to be at home working on the ranch."



PHOTO: VANN CLEVELAND

***"Nobody loves the land any more than
a farmer, and nobody wants to protect it
more than they do. But there is some line at
which farming is no longer profitable."***

Diane Hawks, with husband, Bill, Hernando, Miss.

PHOTO: JOE LINK

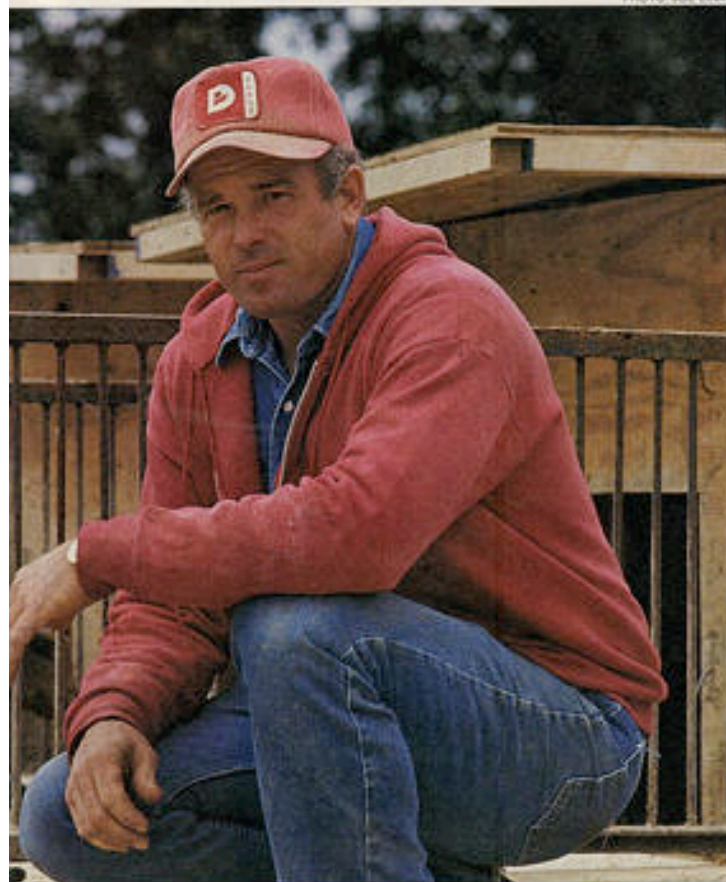
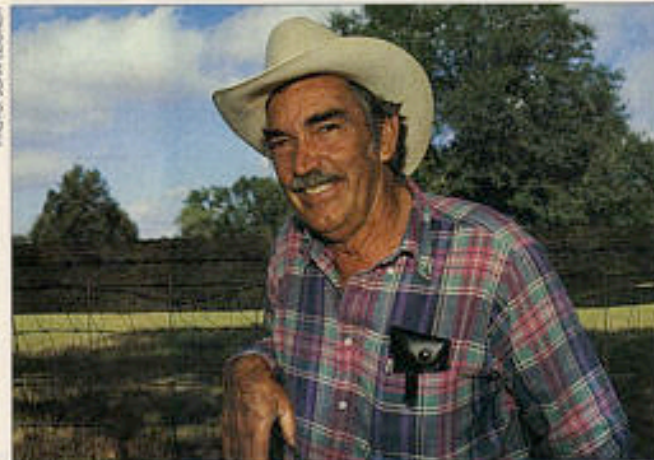


PHOTO: BOYD KIDWELL



PHOTO: JOHN LEONER



“These radical groups have never been hungry. The problem is there has never been a famine in the U. S., and people just take agriculture for granted.”

Leroy Baldwin, Ocala, Fla.

feel successful, although 63% worry about the future.

Some remembered deciding to become a farmer or rancher as almost fated — as an inborn, driving need that had to be satisfied.

“It’s not any fun anymore. I chose farming over flying commercial airplanes, and at this point I wish I had gone the other way.”

James H. Fleming, Enfield, N.C.

“Every Friday afternoon when I’d get out of school [in town], my granddaddy was there and would pick me up, and I’d be out on the farm until Sunday night,” remembers Ronnie Hargett of Rich Pond, Ky.

“Finally, when I became a freshman in high school, my grandfather took legal guardianship [of me] so I could move out and be there all the time.”

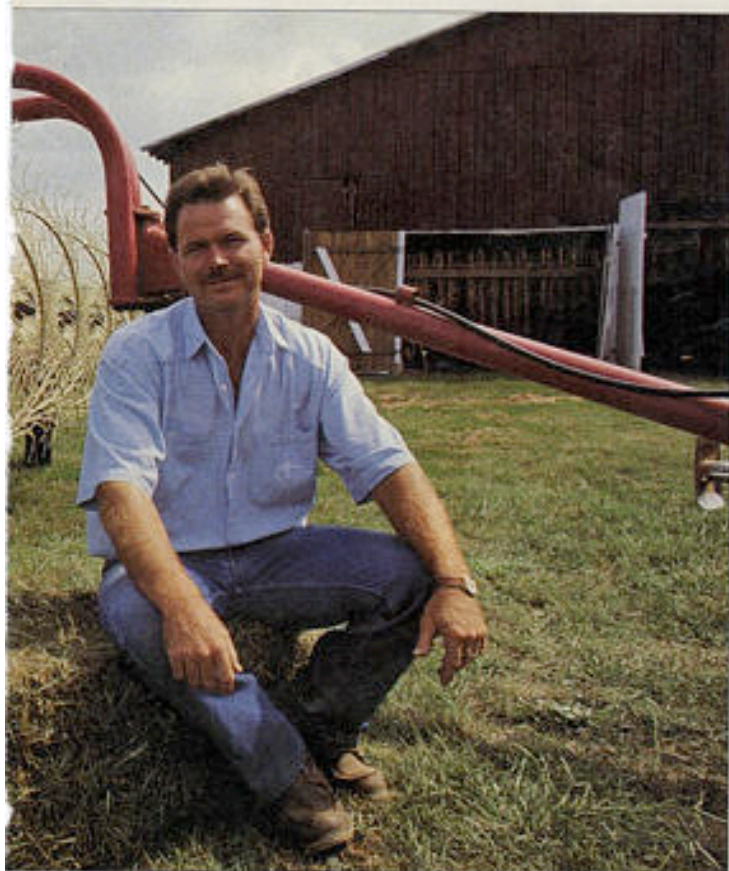
Hargett raises burley tobacco, alfalfa, and beef cattle.

Burris, too, loved farming from an early age. “When I was six years old, I knew what I wanted to do and that’s what I’ve done,” he says.

“I’ve never known a farmer to get rich,” says Baldwin. “But everything we own is paid for, and we pay all our bills. As long as I don’t starve, why, I’m going to continue to do it.”

But for some, making a marginal profit is so difficult that the effort doesn’t seem worthwhile.

“A few years back, we could just plant a crop based on the allotments and market them and make a little money,” says Fleming of North Carolina.



"I guess even if I wasn't trying to, somewhere or another I'd slip up and encourage my children to become farmers."

Ronnie Hargett, Rich Pond, Ky.

Baldwin says, "I tried to point out all the hardships of farming — the fact that the livestock has to be fed and watered on Sundays, too, and in the rain and in the cold."

Although he is pleased that his children chose to ranch with him, it was their decision.

"I just told them they could make a living here if they worked at it, but I didn't think it was something for everybody," he recalls.

When asked whether he will encourage his two young children to farm, Hargett tells a joke about a farmer that was supposedly abusing his child. "He signed over half of his farm to his son," the Kentucky farmer laughs.

But Hargett becomes serious when talking about the future of his beloved profession.

"It's easy sometimes to [feel] down after it's been a long hot day or a year even of drought or too much rain," he admits.

"But I feel very positive about agriculture. We're a minority that the majority needs [in order] to eat. And that's something to take care of. Food is a valuable resource."

Most of you name environmental worries as your biggest problem with chemical use. When we asked for elaboration, most of you said you were concerned that the public's perceptions seem to be more influential on chemical-use regulations than are legitimate scientific concerns.

"I don't have any problem with doing anything that will protect the environment," says Baldwin, echoing a comment that we heard over and over again.

"We've got some that need correcting, but as a whole, agriculture people are the greatest environmentalists on earth."

"We do not, we do not want to rape and pillage the land," says Van Sweden. "We want [the land] to pass down to our succeeding generations."

"I think our biggest challenge in agriculture today is more of an awareness problem with the general public," says Baldwin.

A little more than 48% of you say you are financially better off than you were five years ago. But about 68% of you are unsure that your financial condition will continue to improve in 1993.

"I do not expect [to improve financially in 1993] mainly because of Bill and Hilary [Clinton]," says Fleming. "I'm more depressed this year than I have been in years back, because of the unknown."

For Bill and Diane Hawks, this will be a moderately successful year but no "bonanza financially," according to Bill.

"The ag economy is such a global economy, heavily influenced by politics," says Diane. "You just have to hope that you're on top of situations enough that you can find a way to make them work for you instead of letting them work against you."

Baldwin flatly states: "These radical groups have never been hungry. I spent three weeks in the Soviet Union in 1991. Those folks, they think anybody that's an agriculture expert is almost next to God. They starve to death every winter."

"The problem is there has never been a famine in the U.S. and people just take agriculture for granted," he concludes.

Perhaps Van Sweden summed up your feelings best when he noted a simple yet inescapable fact: "If you eat, you're involved in agriculture."

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

OTHER OPINIONS

My family has a better standard of living than do the nonfarm families I know.	Agree 44%	Disagree 17%
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The passage of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the North American Free Trade Agreement will help my farming operation.	Agree 18%	Disagree 28%
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If you have highly erodible land, do you have a written conservation plan?	Yes 95%	No 7%
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My family will invest this amount out of pocket in our conservation plan:

Less than \$1,000	\$1,000 to \$10,000	More than \$10,000
57%	47%	5%

Editor's note — Figures do not total 100% because numbers are rounded, "not sure" answers are not included, and some questions were incomplete.