

# Farmers



## Occupational Brief Title Codes:

- D.O.T.: 421.161-010
- G.O.E.: 03.01.01
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## Occupational Subtitles:

- Crop Farmers
- Dairy Farmers

## Work Classification Based Related

### D.O.T. Occupations:

- Animal Breeders
- Artificial Breeding Technicians
- Beekeepers
- Game Farm Supervisors
- Harvest Contractors
- Horticultural Specialty Growers

## Interests Based Related

### G.O.E. Occupations:

- Dairy Farm Managers
- Field Contractors
- Game Preserve Managers
- Harvest Contractors
- Livestock Ranchers
- Migrant Leaders

## Skills Based Related

### O\*NET Occupations:

- Agricultural Crop Farm Managers
- Agricultural Inspectors
- Farm and Home Management Advisors
- Fishers and Related Fishing Workers
- Fish Hatchery Managers
- General Farmworkers

## Noteworthy Quote:

*"Farming is not for everyone. It requires self-motivation, dedication, and an affinity for hard work. Not only does farming require skills in horticulture and animal husbandry, a successful farmer must be good at business management, planning, organization, mechanics, and carpentry as well. Although the financial rewards may sometimes be inadequate, the multitude of tasks and responsibilities make a farmer's life diverse and satisfying."*

–Scott Rafferty, Retired Dairy Farmer

**Farmers** (ˈfarm-ers) grow and harvest crops such as wheat, corn, vegetables, and fruit for food and crops like cotton for fibers. They also raise animals such as cows for meat and dairy products.

Traditionally, farms were small enough to be managed by a farmer, the farmer's family, and a few hired hands. Many farmers produced just enough to support themselves and their families. Today, mechanization and other technological advances make farming a much larger venture. Many small farms have merged to become substantial businesses with a heavy cash flow. Most farms in the United States are large operations, sometimes thousands of acres.

Today's farmers follow scientific methods to produce crops and livestock, which they sell. Successful farm owners or managers are business people with a wide range of skills and knowledge. These experts understand animal science, crop production, soil science, irrigation, and farm business management. They may use their land to raise grain, livestock, poultry, cotton, fruits, vegetables, nursery field crops, or any of more than 300 other commercial farm products.

## Work Performed

Farmers may either own a farm or rent the land that they work. Although many farms are very large businesses, many farmers still operate small family farms. The kind of work farmers do depends on the kind of farm, its size, the seasons of the year, and the weather.

**Crop farmers** prepare the soil and plant the seed. The right time for planting is vital. Farmers must plant the seeds early enough to allow time for them to grow and mature, but late enough so that late frosts will not kill them. With the help of tractors and other farm machinery, they fertilize, cultivate, spray and dust, irrigate, and harvest crops.

After the harvest, they sort, process, package, load, and market their produce. For some specialty crops, such as fruits and vegetables, farmers must hire seasonal labor in order to harvest these crops at their peak and get them to market in good condition.



*Farming is seasonal, and each season has its tasks.  
Photo by CGP Staff*

**Dairy farmers** raise cows, milk and feed them, and furnish bedding. All farmers who raise livestock watch their animals for signs of illness, protect them from diseases with inoculations, breed stock and produce young animals according to good genetic methods.

Farmers must keep barns, pens, stalls, coops, and other animal housing clean and in repair. They must also make sure that barns, silos, and bins for storing grain or other produce are well-maintained. Farmers keep their equipment in good repair, build fences, and control weeds and pests.

Farm animals require daily care. Those who raise livestock water, feed, and keep their animals healthy. They prepare the animals for market.

Farmers make many managerial decisions. They plan a yearly work and production schedule. While planning their crop schedule, they must consider the weather, the demand for their products, and the labor they will need to produce their crops. They carefully plan the combination of crops to grow, so that if prices for one crop go down, they will get income from another crop to make up the loss.

By watching market prices and the economy, farmers can plan ahead. They may store a crop for a season or keep their livestock until prices rise. They must plan purchases such as machinery, fertilizer, feed, seeds, and supplies. They keep records on their expenses and their income.

Farmers may secure loans from banks or other agencies to pay for land, machinery, fertilizer, livestock, and feed. Most farmers today use computers to keep records on inventory, finances, and other farm activities. Some use personal computers to get the latest information on prices of farm products and other agricultural news.

### **Working Conditions**

Farming is seasonal, and each season has its tasks. Most farm work is outdoors or in outbuildings. The hours are long, and the work is hard. Farmers spend much of their time driving a tractor or other farm machinery to plant, cultivate, and harvest crops. They may have to handle or control large animals. Often a farm operation consists of all the members of one family. If farmers hire workers, they work along with them.

Farmers who raise livestock are busy with the day-to-day and emergency care of their animals. Dairy farmers must milk their animals twice a day. Caring for animals in winter can be rugged work.

The chief dangers of farming are injuries from machines or animals, falls, and allergies. Careful farmers can reduce these dangers.

### **Hours and Earnings**

Farmers work long hours. They get up early and frequently work into the evening. For crop farmers, the

work varies with the seasons. At times the workload is very heavy. When the weather is right for spraying, planting, or harvesting, farmers stay on the job to complete it. In busy seasons they may work seventy or more hours a week. The remaining months of the year, farmers plant crops for the next season, sell their crops, and repair machinery.

Farmers who raise livestock must give daily care to their animals. Vacations are difficult to schedule. To leave the farm, dairy farmers must have dependable workers who can take over while they are away.

Farm income varies from year to year. Prices for farm output shift with weather and other factors that affect the amount and quality of farm products and the demand. Farm income also varies with the kind and size of farm. Published figures do not take into consideration the many variables that affect farm earnings. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, farmers earned an average of \$43,740 a year. Earnings ranged from a high of more than \$81,100 a year to a low of less than \$24,410 a year.

A farm business often takes years to yield a profit. Many farmers get long-term loans to buy a farm or land and equipment. When they make a profit, they may use part of their earnings to buy more land, equipment, or animals. Many farmers and their spouses may have other jobs that pay more than their income from farming.

Farmers make their own arrangements for health and insurance benefits. Farm organizations often offer health and life insurance to their members.

### **Education and Training**

A farm background and participation in a farm program such as the National FFA Organization (formally known as the Future Farmers of America) is valuable preparation for farming work. In high school, students should take mathematics, science, accounting, Spanish, and English. They should also take courses required for admission to the college they plan to attend.

Increasingly, the complex science of modern farming requires formal education in a two-year or four-year agricultural college. Farmers should have enough technical knowledge to be able to choose the crops for their soil and climate, gauge growing cycles, and allow for the weather in planning harvests. They must have a basic knowledge of accounting and bookkeeping in order to keep financial records. The protection and conservation of resources of the earth and the natural environment are also important to farmers. Farmers must be informed on soil conservation, water quality, pesticides, and public health concerns. They must keep up with complex safety regulations, the requirements of government agricultural support programs, labor and environmental laws, and the paperwork that goes along with them.

All states have land-grant universities offering major programs of study in agricultural economics, animal science, agronomy, horticulture, or other specialty. The curriculum should include courses in farm management, business, finance, and economics. Many colleges offer special programs of study covering products important in the area in which they are located, such as animal science programs at colleges in the Western and Plains states.

These institutions also offer short courses, extension work, and other low-cost or free services to farmers in the state. Adult evening classes are available to farmers who want to keep up with advances in farm methods, new techniques, changing laws, and changing technologies.

### **Licensing, Certification, Unions and Professional Societies**

Several organizations support the interests of farmers. Chief among them is the American Farm Bureau Federation. It consists of state farm bureaus in all fifty states and Puerto Rico, which represent more than 48 million individuals. Other farm organizations include the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry with 300,000 individual members, the National Farmers Union with 250,000 individual members, and the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, which has 1,500 company members. These organizations sponsor legislation and promote the educational interests of farmers.

Farm managers can acquire professional status through certification as an Accredited Farm Manager (AFM) by the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers. Candidates must have several years of farm experience and an approved academic background--a bachelor's degree, or better yet, a master's degree, in a field of agricultural science. They must also pass courses and examinations on business, financial, and legal procedures in farm management.

### **Personal Qualifications**

Farmers must have managerial skills to organize and operate a farm. All farmers should enjoy outdoor work. Patience and the ability to withstand setbacks such as bad weather, crop failure, damage by insects, or a drop in farm prices are important. Self-discipline is necessary in order to set goals and reach them.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

### **Where Employed**

Farmers work in rural regions all across the United States. The climate and terrain determine the kind of

farming for any region. Plains are best for grain. Hilly land may be good pasture for dairy farming. The long warm seasons of the South and West are ideal for crops that take a long time to grow.

More than 50 percent of all farm residents live in the Midwest, followed by the South with 29 percent, the West with 15 percent, and the Northeast with 5 percent. The state with the highest number of farmers is Texas, followed by Missouri and Iowa.

### **Employment Outlook**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the number of farm workers has been dropping and will continue to do so. Although an increasing world population is increasing the demand for food and fibers, fewer large farming operations will be able to meet this demand. The trend toward fewer and larger farms will reduce the number of jobs for farmers.

The skills required for modern farming, the cost of equipment, and the difficulty of obtaining loans do not allow room for those who consider farming a part-time operation. Many small and medium-size farms do not show enough profit to support an adequate standard of living, although some small farmers are finding profitable opportunities as organic farmers who do not use pesticides or chemicals on their products.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of farmers is expected to continue to decline through the year 2012. Market pressures and low prices for many agricultural goods will cause more farms to go out of business. Large-scale farms are forcing out small farmers who cannot meet the rising costs of land and equipment.

The growing complexity of farming, however, will demand skilled, well-educated farmers. An increasing number of farms have absentee owners. This trend is creating openings for farm managers.

### **Entry Methods**

Many people in farming have grown up on farms. In general, however it is difficult for others to enter farming unless they have strong financial support from some source. The costs of starting a farm are so high that it is very difficult to set up a farming enterprise. For some crops, such as tobacco or cotton, the cost of labor is high. For others such as wheat, the costs of machinery might amount to more than \$200,000.

Some individuals start by becoming tenant farmers. They rent land, housing, and equipment, and share the cash profits with the owner. They hope to gain both experience and the money to buy and manage their own farm.

Livestock farmers may also start by renting property and sometimes animals in a share-the-profits arrangement with the owner. It is possible to graze animals on land rented from the government. By borrowing half the money

required to set up an operation, individuals may become established. Loans are difficult to obtain, however. Banks and savings and loans groups have tightened their lending policies.

People thinking about buying a farm should first get practical experience and inform themselves of the risks of farming.

### **Advancement**

Farmers advance by buying more acreage, buying more livestock, and improving the net returns on their operations. In general, the more formal education a person has in any field, the better the chances to advance.

### **For Further Research**

**American Farm Bureau Federation**, 600 Maryland Ave. SW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20024. Web site: [www.fb.org](http://www.fb.org)

**American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers**, 950 South Cherry Street, Suite 508, Denver, CO 80246-2664. Web site: [www.asfmra.org](http://www.asfmra.org)

**National FFA Organization**, P.O. Box 68960, 6060 FFA Drive, Indianapolis, IN 46268-0960. Web site: [www.ffa.org](http://www.ffa.org)

**National Farmers Union**, 11900 East Cornell Ave., Aurora, CO 80014-3194. Web site: [www.nfu.org](http://www.nfu.org)

**National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry**, 1616 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006. Web site: [www.nationalgrange.org](http://www.nationalgrange.org)

**United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association**, 1901 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20006. Web site: [www.uffva.org](http://www.uffva.org)

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