

# Keys to Farm Resilience: What Makes Agriculture Thrive?

► This publication outlines how farm stress and resiliency research shows the importance of relationships, decision-making skills and resources, and sound farm management decisions.

Farmers and farm families often describe farming as a way of life—one that includes growing food and fiber for the global population. This life also involves managing weather and natural disaster risks, commodity prices and markets, and more. Balancing the risks that can affect the viability of a farm is a necessary challenge. Recent farm stress research focuses on resiliency, which is central to stress management and farm success.

Resiliency, the process of adapting to the challenges faced by farm households, is important for farming families to sustain their way of life. Three key factors impact farm resiliency: farm structure and management, relationships, and change-making decisions.

## Farm Structure, Farm Management, and Farm Resiliency

Resilient farms are those with farmers who make management decisions that address risk factors to farming operations and shape or reshape their farm structure to address new challenges. Farm structure factors include the features of the farming operation that relate to size, commodity diversity, and type of operation. Factors relating to resiliency regarding farm management methods include labor and employment practices, income stream diversity, the use of federal farm programs, and commodity marketing and sale decisions. Farmers regularly make countless, seemingly small, and regular management decisions, such as when to plant and harvest, relating to their farm structure and other preceding management decisions. Farmers and farm families also make substantial management decisions regarding commodity diversification and farm size. These choices shape their operations not only for that growing season but also for years to come. Economists have studied farm structure and management decisions for years, and there are existing resources for farmers and farm families working to decide if specific management decisions



will be economically viable for their farms. Sound farm management strategies that lead to financially healthy farming operations are the initial steps to having a resilient farm.

## Relationships and Farm Resiliency

Farmers with dynamic, resilient relationships farm resilient farms. While the word *farmer* might conjure a mental image of a solo individual working on a farm, farming operations are rarely lone ventures. Family-owned farm operations commonly have numerous relationships, both on and off the farm, which impact resiliency. On-farm relationships involve immediate family members, extended family, and employees. Off-farm relationships include lenders, crop consultants, livestock buyers, integrators, wholesale customers, agents in local

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) offices, Extension agents and specialists, farm organization officials, and peer farmers, to name a few. The off-farm community-related relationships involve neighbors, friends, and community members.

These relationships are dynamic and ever-changing. Resilient farms are those with resilient farm households, where farmers and farm families have strong ties within their farming operation and off-farm with those they interact with regularly for business and social support. Farmers with strong ties to others, both friends and family, also have strong support networks when challenges arise. Farm households with an open, robust dialogue and multiple avenues of communication about risks and challenges are more resilient than those less vocal with support networks—family or peers—about their challenges. Resilient farms do not necessarily face fewer challenges due to their particular management choices or the risks they encounter. Resilient farms are those where the farmer and farm household are open and clear about their challenges and rely on support from their on- and off-farm networks.

## Change-Making Decisions and Resiliency

No two days are the same when farming. A final factor resilient farms share is that their farm operators respond to changes and challenges with strong decision-making. Without the oversight of external managers, farmers and their families regularly make critical and seemingly minor decisions that shape the future of their farming business. To make these frequent decisions, resilient farmers must have confidence. This confidence in farm management and structured decision-making often stems from the strength of a farmer's relationships and support network

of family, mentors, peers, and business colleagues. Knowing where and how to access resources to meet a specific challenge is critical when making decisions in times of stress. Farmers often use the resources provided by the USDA, state Extension systems, farm organizations, and peers to navigate unfamiliar challenges and issues.

## Toward More Resilient Farms and Farm Families

Resilient farms face challenges and adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of the agriculture industry. Resilient farms are economically viable through their management decisions and have farmers with strong relationships on and off the farm, allowing key decisions to be made with ease. Farm stress and resiliency research shows the importance of sound farm management decisions, relationships, and decision-making skills.

## Resources

- Southern Ag Exchange Network (SAGe)  
[southernagexchange.org](http://southernagexchange.org)



**Kelli J. Russell**, *Assistant Extension Professor*, Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University

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