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Aging Farmers with Disabilities: From Omission to Belonging

Elizabeth DePoy, Ph.D., Stephen Gilson, Ph.D., and Richard Brzozowski, Ph.D.

“When projects base their actions on insufficient or faulty information, the result is (at best) a misplaced intervention that little corresponds to the needs of the population.” ~ Schoomaker Freudenberg, 2017

Background

A significant portion of the research on the aging of the agricultural workforce focuses on land transfer and retirement strategies with much of the literature detailing disability prevention. Implicit in this canon is that farmers with impairments do not enter or remain in agricultural occupations. Yet, many farmers are aging with disabilities, including the large population of disabled veterans who turned to rural life and farming as a post-combat occupation. Unfortunately, current research is limited in informing methods to foster the productivity, safety, comfort, and quality of life of aging farmers with disabilities, who despite age and impairment have no formal plans to retire or to pass their businesses or real estate on to younger operators. Given the limited body of research on aging rural populations in general, and older farmers with disabilities in specific, this study was conducted.

Methods

A survey design was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What future farming plans are articulated by aging farmers with disabilities?
2. What health and disability-related barriers and assets influencing future farming plans are articulated by aging farmers with disabilities?
3. What demographic and experience factors are correlates of plans, barriers, and assets?
4. What unmet needs to achieve individual farming goals are articulated by aging farmers with disabilities.

Respondents

The sample was comprised of 16 males and 5 females (one respondent did not report gender) (n=22). As per inclusion criteria, all were over the age of 50 with 77.27% (n=20) age of 60 and over. All had reported disabling conditions. Five respondents reported ranging age from 70-88. 31.82% (n=7) farmed part-time and 65.22% (n=15) reported farming as their primary, full-time careers. Only 13.04% (n=3) worked alone in farming chores.

With the exception of one respondent who reported no future plans for farming, all planned to continue farming from 2 to over 30 years (m=13.95, sd=9.21). A range of farming was reported including forage, cattle, vegetables, fruits and other produce, dairy, tree fanning, aqua-farming and “diversified.” Respondents had been farming from 10-50+ years (m=35.55, sd=14.29). Twelve (n=12) reported that they continue to farm in order to obtain a steady income.

Table 1. Perceived Problems and Barriers to Farming Longevity

Perceived Problem	mean	SD
Using power tools	.12	.33
Operating farm equipment (e.g., tractors, backhoes, etc.)	0	0
Driving farm vehicles on public roads during the day	0	0
Driving farm vehicles at night	.31	.48
Manipulating hand tools	.42	.61
Handling small animals	.17	.39
Handling large animals	.67	.49
Lifting heavy objects	.83	.71
Pulling/pushing carts or trailers	.76	.75
Pulling attachments with a tractor (e.g., plow, harrow, bush hog, etc.)		
Working in cold conditions	.89	.66
Working in hot conditions	1.0	.75
Total of farming problems	.48	.30

The findings revealed ingenuity and home-grown adaptations used by aging disabled farmers, but also illuminated serious challenges common to aging bodies and specific to the existing and to some extent increasing severity of impairments as the respondents aged. Moreover, contextual and occupational hazards were of great concern. These included, but were not limited to, extreme heat and cold, the interaction of decreasing visual acuity and changes in indoor and outdoor light, heavy physical and sensory demands of large farm equipment operation, and for some, increasing difficulty managing large animals. Embodied conditions such as increasing weakness, decreasing energy levels, and fatigue were among the factors identified as further contributing to inability to remain productive as desired.

Respondents identified assets as well, including home-rigged devices and methods to stay safe as they engaged in farm tasks, help from neighboring farmers, and enjoyment of their work.



Table 2. Factors Influencing Farming Longevity

Factor	Frequency
Negative Factors	
My health is not as good as it used to be*	17
I worry about getting injured in farm work*	2
I am not as strong as I used to be*	13
My sight is not as good as it was when I was younger*	9
My hearing is not as good as it was when I was younger*	7
My memory is not as good as it was when I was younger*	12
I get tired more quickly than I used to*	15
Farming work often causes pain in my joints*	5
Assets: Positive Factors	
I love my work**	20
I have help from other people (e.g., family, friends, hired help) on the farm**	12
I use tools or technology to make farming easier**	11

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