

Operator Characteristics

The average age of Virginia farm operators has steadily increased from 54.5 years (1987) to 55.6 (1992) to 56.4 (1997). Table 31 indicates that, across extension districts, average age varies by only 3.2 years from the highest (Northern) to the lowest (Southeast). However, the distribution of ages within and across districts shows how the districts' farm operators differ. Districts vary particularly in their proportions of operators under 35 years (termed young farmers). Northern District has only 3.8 percent of young operators (only 260 young farmers). Southeast District has 7.2 percent young operators (only 168 young farmers). Surprisingly, Southwest District has 7.0 percent young operators. Because of the large number of farms in the district, the 853 young farmers of Southwest District are nearly double the number of young farmers in any other district.

Extension District	Proportion of Operators in Age Range			Average Age (Years)
	Under 35 Years (%)	35-59 Years (%)	60 Years or More (%)	
Central	4.6	51.3	44.1	57.2
Northeast	4.7	51.3	44.0	56.3
Northern	3.8	52.5	43.6	57.5
Northwest	6.2	52.1	41.7	56.0
Southeast	7.2	56.3	36.4	54.3
Southwest	7.0	53.1	39.9	55.6
Virginia	5.7	52.5	41.9	56.4

Observing the age distribution of farm operators between 35-59 years (the mid-aged farmers), the only district that is unusual is Southeast. Combined with its high proportion of young farmers, it can be seen that Southeast District is best equipped for the cycle of generation turnover, with 63.5 percent of its farm operators under 60 years. In contrast, Central and Northeast Districts have much lower proportions of farm operators under 60.

The proportion of young farmers across the state has decreased from 7.5 percent in 1992 to 5.7 percent in 1997. Of course, undercounting of some young farmers could be expected because they may be working for or with an older relative who reports as the operator in the Census. However, the reported number of young farmers has fallen from 3,156 in 1992 to only 2,325 operators under 35 years in 1997 (-26 percent). The decline in young farmers starkly indicates the human resource crisis in Virginia agriculture. A small number of younger Virginia farmers will have to manage ever larger farms over the next few decades if the land is to stay in agricultural use.

A more immediate crisis concerns the number of older operators that will eventually cease to operate farms. There are at least 17,210 Virginia operators that will likely be leaving agriculture within 15 years or less. If such operators left regularly throughout the next 15 years, there would be 1,150 transitions/retirements/estate settlements per year.

The gender distribution of Virginia farm operators has gradually changed as females operate more and more farms. The proportion of female operators has risen from 8.5 percent in 1987 to 10.8 percent in 1997. In addition, the proportion of Virginia farm acres operated by females increased from 6.0 percent in 1987 to 7 percent in 1997 (572,400 acres). Across districts, there is relatively little variation in the proportion of female operators except in Northern District (Table 32). Only three counties in Northern District have a lower female proportion than the state average, and four counties have greater than 20 percent female operators (Fairfax, Loudon, Prince William, and Fauquier). As farming becomes more intensive around other urbanizing centers, it can be expected that the number and proportion of female operators will rise as well.

Table 32. Operator Sex by Extension District		
Extension District	Male (%)	Female (%)
Central	90.9	9.1
Northeast	89.4	10.6
Northern	83.7	16.3
Northwest	90.0	10.0
Southeast	91.0	9.0
Southwest	90.2	9.8
Virginia	89.2	10.8

Operators of African-American, Native American, Asian/Pacific Island, or other racial groups or of Hispanic origin operated 1,474 farms on 212,431 acres in Virginia in 1997 (Table 33), representing 3.6 percent of farms, and 2.6 percent of Virginia farmland. African-Americans make up by far the largest number of operators (1,127), totaling 2.7 percent of all Virginia farms, and 2.1 percent of farms with sales greater than \$10,000 per year. Somewhat more than half of African-American farms are in Central District with Southeast District second. The average farm acreage of farms operated by African-Americans was 120 acres. The number of farms operated by African-American farmers fell by 13.2 percent from 1992-97 (171 farms).

Table 33. Farms Operated by Selected Ethnic Groups*		
	No. of Farms	Average Farm Size (Acres)
African-American	1,127	120
Native American	47	182
Asian/Pacific Islander	43	167
Hispanic	233	248

* 'Other ethnic groups' are not reported in the Agricultural Census.

The number of farms operated by Native Americans fell by 9.6 percent, or 5 farms, while the number of farms operated by Asian or Pacific Islanders rose by 59.2 percent or 16 farms from 1992-97. The fastest growing group among these farmers are those of Hispanic origin, which rose 53.2 percent or 81 farms. Farms with operators of Hispanic origin are primarily located within Central and Southwest Districts. The average size of farms operated by farmers of Hispanic origin was 248 acres in 1997.