**FARMERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES: EXPLORING RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS IN KANSAS**

Stacey Swearingen White, Associate Professor, Urban Planning Department, University of Kansas
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**Study Objective:**
While farmers may function as “independent environmental managers” (Wilson and Hart, 2001), influences on the decisions farmers make extend well beyond the boundaries of their particular farm property. This exploratory study seeks to develop a more robust understanding of the ways that farmer land use decisions both influence and are influenced by conditions in the communities in which they live and farm.

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**Research Questions:**
1) What are the relevant demographic trends in Kansas?
2) What do we know about the mutual interactions between community conditions and farm activity/farmer decision-making?
3) How do Kansas farmers perceive their communities and what do they desire and predict for the future of those communities?

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**Findings: Kansas Demographics**
- The State of Kansas grew at a rate of 4.8% between 2000 and 2009, well below the national growth rate of 9.1%.
- Kansas ranks 41st out of 50 states for population density, with a 2000 density of 32.9 people per square mile.
- Only 1 in 5 Kansas counties is experiencing population growth.
- About half of Kansas counties (55 of 105) have enacted zoning regulations in their unincorporated areas.
- Land use and economic development planning are uncommon in rural Kansas.

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**Preliminary Findings: Kansas Farmers and Their Communities**
- Kansas farmers appreciate many aspects of their communities, including the “small town feel” and the helpfulness neighbors show to one another.
- When asked about changes in their communities over time, many farmers lamented what had been lost — schools, stores, restaurants and so on.
- Farmers varied in their perceptions of likely community futures.
- Despite these community trends, farmers do not appear to make a connection between their on-farm practices and community conditions.
- At the same time, however, these farmers described day-to-day activities, such as driving long distances for banking, health care, and farm equipment needs, that clearly have an impact on farm operations.
- In turn, farmer decisions impact communities in that their available time appears to be the largest determinant of their level of involvement in community activities.

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**Approach and Methods**
- Literature review: rural social capital, rural land use planning, farmer decision-making, rural demography
- Data sources: US Census data and BACC FLUD preliminary interview data with 151 Kansas farmers conducted in Summer 2011
- Full analysis of interview data will begin in Fall 2012, after coding is completed.
- A Fall 2012 survey on community issues will provide further data for developing this study.

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**Early Conclusions and Next Steps**
- While most farmers do not perceive that their actions are linked to conditions in their communities, interview data suggests these connections are present.
- Farmer decisions and community conditions appear to be linked reciprocally.
- Once fully coded, the interview data will yield additional insight into this reciprocity, and will allow the development of a more complete theoretical understanding of farmer decision making and community conditions.

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**Sources:**