

U.S. Farm Bill Policies to Support America's Heroes

Adam J. Ingrao, Craig Wesley Carpenter, Kristopher Deming, Michael Lotspeich-Yadao, and Charles M. Tolbert

JEL Classifications: G28, Q14, Q18

Keywords: Agriculture, Farm Bill, Policy, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Veterans

The U.S. agriculture sector is a critical component of the U.S. economy, contributing 5.5% to U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) and employing 10.4% of U.S. workers (USDA-ERS, 2024). Since the 1930s, Congress has come together approximately every 5 years to pass a Farm Bill that provides authorization and funding for policies, programs, and services administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As one of the largest pieces of legislation authorized by Congress, the Farm Bill currently impacts roughly 3.4 million farmers, and the policies negotiated have a direct impact on farmers' ability to access USDA loans, cost share, manage risk, and participate in conservation and training programs supported by USDA grants (USDA-NASS, 2019).

Despite representing only about 7% of the U.S. population 18 or older, veterans make up 11% of producers, and 17% of farms have veteran producers (USDA-NASS, 2020; see Figure 1). Put another way, if veterans participated in agriculture at the same rate as nonveterans, the United States would have at least 125,000 fewer farmers. In part due to this overrepresentation in agriculture, veterans have been a demographic of focus for new Farm Bill policies in the Agriculture Act of 2014 and the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. Policies focused on veterans entering agriculture have been embraced by lawmakers as an opportunity to recruit veterans into a major economic sector to support veteran employment and entrepreneurship but also to address the aging U.S. farmer population, which has an average age of 57.5 years (USDA-NASS, 2019).

Veterans often struggle with role changes and loss of purpose when reentering civilian life, and agriculture is viewed by many veterans as a meaningful career opportunity that offers an important and identifiable role in the civilian world and an opportunity for continued national service to protect our nation's food security (Shue et al., 2021; USDA, 2024). In this article, we look at current Farm Bill policies impacting veterans, examine how these policies changed between the 2014 and 2018

Farm Bills, and provide recommendations for future Farm Bill policies that seek to further support veterans becoming the next generation of U.S. farmers.

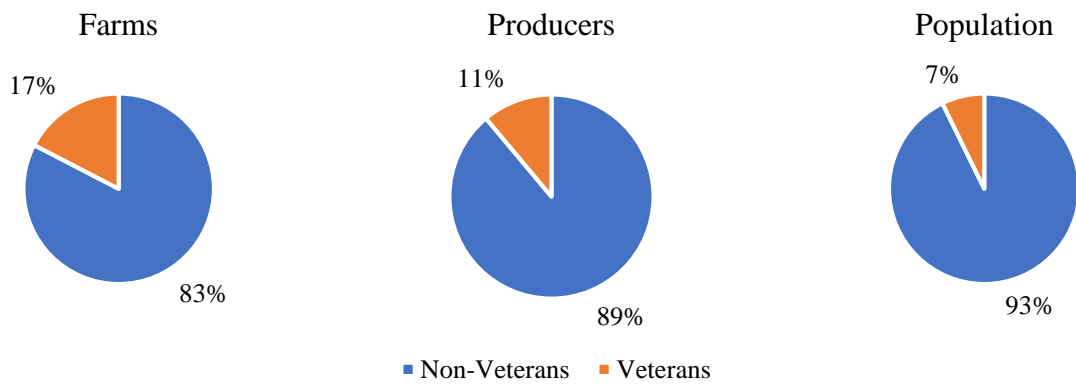
Agriculture Act of 2014

Policy changes in the Agriculture Act of 2014 (the 2014 Farm Bill) sought to recruit veterans returning home from years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq into the agriculture sector. Organizations like the Farmer Veteran Coalition and Farm Credit Council provided opportunities leading up to the final version of the Farm Bill for lawmakers and veterans to interact and share ideas in the common interest of supporting veterans and U.S. agriculture. As a result, new policies were implemented into law that enhanced veteran access to USDA conservation, risk management, and beginning farmer training programs.

As part of the 2014 Farm Bill, veterans were added to the USDA's category of "Historically Underserved and Beginning Farmers." This change provided veterans access to dedicated funds reserved for historically underserved farmers and increased payment rates in some USDA programs, as well as access to beginning farmer programs regardless of how long they had been farming. (The USDA classifies a beginning farmer and rancher as one who has been farming for no more than 10 consecutive years.) In addition, "Veteran Preference" was implemented in many USDA programs, providing preference points to applicants applying for competitive USDA programs, like USDA conservation programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Policy changes also impacted grants that support organizations providing beginning farmer training programs through the USDA's Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and the 2501 Program (also known as the "Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program"). These programs respectively offer grants to higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and community-based organizations that

Figure 1. Overrepresentation of Military Veterans in Agriculture



Notes: 355,393 farms (of 2,042,220 total) have veteran producers. 370,619 producers (of 3,339,834 total) are veterans. 18,204,605 individuals 18 or older (of 251,047,650 total) are veterans. Data is from the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture and the 2017 American Community Survey (USDA-NASS, 2020).

provide agricultural education and related services to beginning farmers and ranchers and underserved farmers and ranchers. Specifically, the policy changes included budget set-asides in both grant programs to ensure that at least 5% of each program’s budget went to programs supporting military veterans.

Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018

Passage of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) drastically changed access to Veterans Preference in USDA programs and funding access for a large subset of the veteran community. Specifically, section 12306 of the 2018 Farm Bill established policy for the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) and NRCS that defines a veteran as an individual who has served in the US Armed Services and (1) has not operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 years (the USDA definition for a beginning farmer) or (2) has obtained veteran status (discharged or retired from the US Armed Services) within the last 10 years.

Additionally, veteran policy related USDA’s Risk Management Agency products established that individuals only qualify as a veteran if they had not operated a farm or ranch for more than 5 years or obtained veteran status within the last 5 years. That is, the 2018 Farm Bill introduced a so-called “sunset clause” to veteran status and access to Veteran Preference in the eyes of the USDA, in which only recent veterans are eligible for programs that claim to support all veterans.

2018 Farm Bill Policy Change Impact on Veterans

The implementation of sunset clauses following the 2018 Farm Bill directly impacted veterans across myriad USDA programs. The sunset clauses undercut the USDA’s public messaging campaign in which the USDA purports to have programs supporting veterans without

mention of how only recent veterans are eligible for access to programs supporting veterans or Veteran Preference within USDA programs (e.g., <https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/veterans>). By only observing their sacrifices to our nation for a finite time, lawmakers have implemented a policy that starts to impact veterans’ access to USDA programs the moment they discharge from the military, despite being largely unknown to the military community. Indeed, focus groups of rural U.S. military veterans conducted by the authors indicated that most veterans are not aware that the length of their veteran status may limit their competitiveness in USDA programs or make them ineligible for some programs (Ingrao et al., 2023). This policy also disproportionately impacts rural veterans, who make up 25% of the rural population and who are the most likely to come from a farming background and may be returning to a family farming operation (Holder, 2017; USDA-NASS, 2019). Many of these individuals would be disqualified for Veteran Preference or access to some USDA programs simply because they come from a farming background and have over 5–10 years of experience operating a farm. That is, if an individual operated a farm for 5–10 years prior to becoming a military veteran, they would not qualify for many support programs purporting to support military veterans.

Many veterans transitioning from the military are coming to terms with service-related disabilities, loss of camaraderie, finding purpose after national service, service-related trauma, and other transitional issues, putting them at higher risk for suicide and mental health disorders (Seal et al., 2009; Kang et al., 2015). These factors may impact how long it takes a veteran to identify a career path following service, which will directly impact their access to a veteran classification for USDA programs. Sunset clauses also penalize veterans who first pursue education related to agriculture or have farm operation experience prior to military service, which may cause them to lose years that they could access USDA veteran classification. These young veterans are pivotal

in recruiting the next generation of farmers, and current USDA veteran status policy runs contrary to this important resource to American agriculture.

Policy Recommendations for the 2024 Farm Bill

As the USDA seeks to address the aging farmer population and provide meaningful careers in the agriculture sector for veterans, it is counterproductive to implement sunset clauses for veteran classification in USDA programs. Readopting the veteran classification policies of the 2014 Farm Bill and eliminating sunset clauses related to veteran classification would mitigate unnecessary confusion in the veteran community regarding access to USDA programs and open more opportunities for the veterans who are feeding our nation.

In addition to removing barriers for veterans to access USDA programs, policymakers working on the 2024 Farm Bill should also consider adding other USDA programs not provided for in the Farm Bill that directly impact the training of military veterans as farmers. USDA-NIFA's Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Military Veterans (AgVets) grant program funds organizations that provide farmer training and

employment programs focused on veterans. AgVets was originally funded through Section 760 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 (H.R. 244) and as such is not permanently funded. Currently, the grant budget is around \$5 million, which supports between five and eight projects annually. By writing the AgVets program into the 2024 Farm Bill, policymakers would provide permanent funding for a USDA program specifically supporting the training and workforce development of veterans in agriculture.

Conclusions

Those who serve in the armed services make sacrifices that are unimaginable to most. Further, veterans are overrepresented in rural areas and in agriculture. Providing increased access to USDA programs to support the success of these individuals following their military service is a small token of gratitude we can provide as a grateful nation. Further, as the U.S. faces a continually aging farmer population, it is important to recognize that recruiting those who are younger and who have trained to be leaders in the military can provide us with farmers ready to lead us into a food secure future.

For More Information

- Holder, K.A. 2017. *Veterans in Rural America: 2011–2015*. American Community Survey Reports ACS-36. U.S. Census Bureau.
- Ingrao, Adam, Craig Wesley Carpenter, Michael Lotspeich-Yadao, and Charles Tolbert. 2023. Focus groups of Michigan military veteran entrepreneurs. Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan Annual Conference. Grand Rapids, MI. January.
- Kang, H.K., T.A. Bullman, D.J. Smolenski, N.A. Skopp, G.A. Gahm, and M.A. Reger. 2015. "Suicide Risk among 1.3 Million Veterans Who Were on Active Duty during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars." *Annals of Epidemiology* 25(2):96–100.
- Seal, K.H., T.J. Metzler, K.S. Gima, D. Bertenthal, S. Maguen, and C.R. Marmar. 2009. "Trends and Risk Factors for Mental Health Diagnoses among Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Using Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care, 2002–2008." *American Journal of Public Health* 99(9):1651–1658.
- Shue, S., M.S. Matthias, D.P. Watson, K.K. Miller, and N. Munk. 2021. "The Career Transition Experiences of Military Veterans: A Qualitative Study." *Military Psychology* 33(6):359–371.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2024. "Veterans." Available online: <https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/veterans>
- USDA Economic Research Service. 2024. "Ag and Food Sectors of the Economy." Available online: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy/> [Accessed February 2024].
- USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2019. "United States Summary and State Data Volume 1 Geographic Area Series Part 51." *2017 Census of Agriculture*.
- USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2020. "Producers with Military Service." 2017 Census of Agriculture Highlights ACH17-22. Available online: <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2020/census-military-producers.pdf>

About the Authors: Adam J. Ingrao (adam@miffs.org) is an Outreach Specialist with Michigan Food and Farming Systems. Craig Wesley Carpenter (cwcarp@msu.edu) is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist with the Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics at Michigan State University. Kristopher Deming (kristopher.deming@afacademy.af.edu) is an Assistant Professor and Analyst with the Office of Labor and Economic Analysis at the United States Air Force Academy. Michael Lotspeich-Yadao (mlots2@illinois.edu) is a Research Assistant Professor with the College of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign. Charles M. Tolbert (charlie_tolbert@baylor.edu) is a Professor Emeritus with the Department of Sociology at Baylor University.

Acknowledgement: The project was supported by the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative Competitive Program of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), award number 2018-68006-34968. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force Academy, the Air Force, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or the U.S. Government.