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Farm Size, Tenure, and Age Distribution of Farmers in Louisiana

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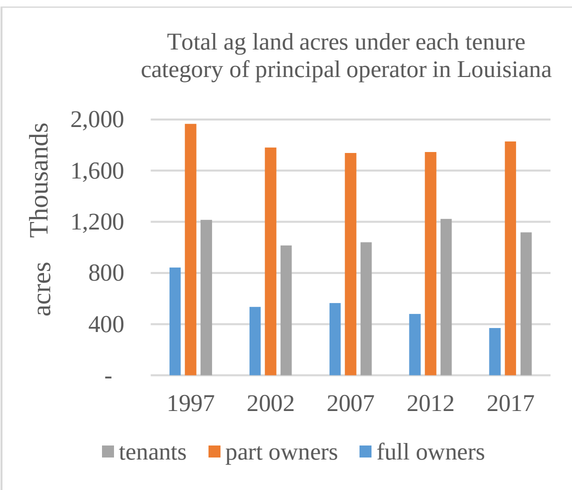
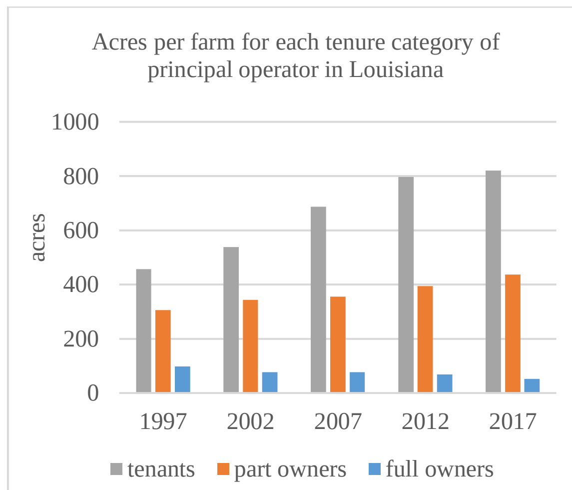
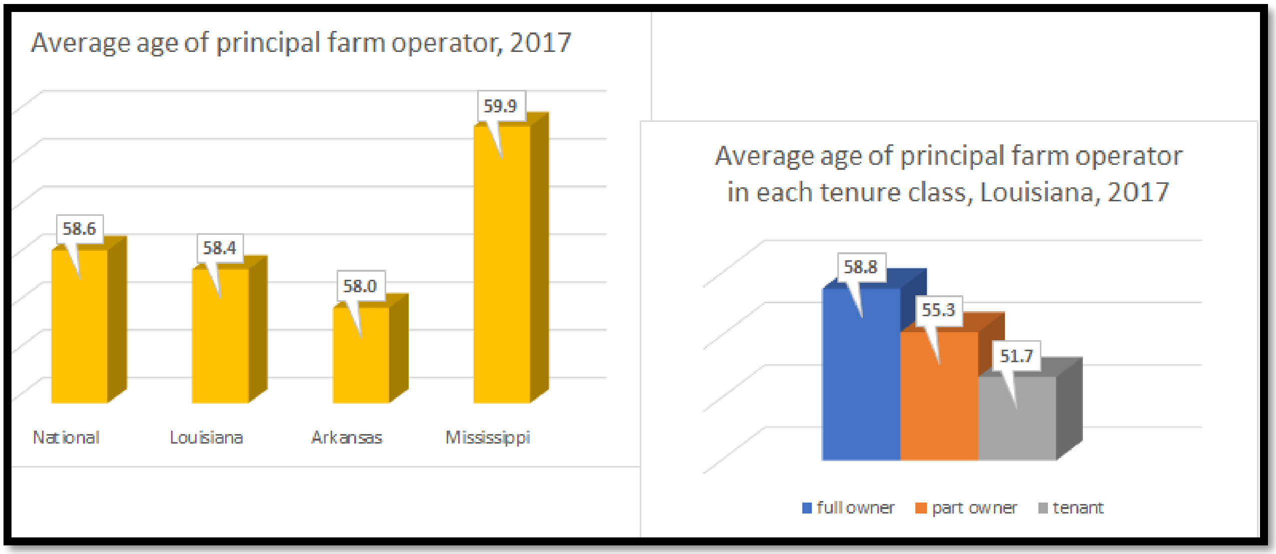
Farm ownership can provide some insights into conservation adoption preferences among farmers in the state. The number of acres farmed by full-owners, part-owners, and tenant farmers shows that from 1997 to 2017, land farmed by full-owners has declined more than 50%, whereas land farmed by the other two groups declined only slightly. However, part-owners farm substantially more acres, 5-times more than full-owners. Similarly, tenant farmers farm 3-times more acres than full-owners. On the other hand, the number of acres per farm under each tenure category shows that tenant farmers have more acres per farm and the size of the farms are on an upward trend. Their farm size increased from 450 acres in 1997 to 820 acres in 2017, doubling in twenty years. The two graphs show the trends over the last five agricultural census.





Source: 2017 Agricultural Census

Although multiple reasons could be cited for the decline in ownership, one of the reasons could be the age of the principal farm operator. In 2017 census, the average age of Louisiana principal farm operator is 58.4 years, slightly lower than the national average of 58.6 years. This average age declined compared to 2002, where it was 58.6 years, higher than the national average at that time. The lower average age can be a result of that older generation of principal farm operators' leaving agriculture. Moreover, under each tenure category, not surprisingly, the full-owners represent the oldest group, followed by part-owner, and tenant farmers.



Source: 2017 Agricultural Census

It is well documented that ownership and average farm size plays a positive role in long-term conservation strategy implementation. Louisiana has a unique challenge where tenant farmers farm size is substantially higher than any other group. Given that ownership is one of the eligibility criteria for conservation implementation through cost-share programs, it is important that those exiting agriculture and renting out land to tenants perceive the conservation needs as critical to the long-term sustainability of natural resources. At the same time, tenant farmers should perceive the benefits of conservation practices beyond short-term profits and advocate for conservation practices that are both economically profitable and environmentally effective.

Conservation practices such as reduced tillage significantly increased in Louisiana in 2017 compared to 2012, following a similar trend with an increase in the number of farms, reported in this document. Large farms can help reduce production costs as well as conservation implementation, especially of those practices that are perceived to provide more economic benefit and thought to minimally alter the current production practice. Although there is no clear indication that one practice is easily incorporated into current production practices than the other, adoption of some of the conservation practices in the state is moving in the right direction.

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