



When Generations Farm/Ranch Together

Reviewed and revised by: **Sean Brotherson**,
Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension

Sharing decisions, asking for what you want, listening well and resolving conflicts quickly can help eliminate stress among generations farming/ranching together. This fact sheet identifies potential stress issues when generations farm or ranch together and suggests practical strategies for reducing stress and solving concerns.

— On Farming —

“The lifestyle in farming or ranching isn’t just about animals or crops. It’s about beliefs and values passed down through generations.

Ensuring things are left better for those yet to come. It’s all about legacy.”

Unknown

Farming and Ranching Across Generations

Mutual enjoyment and closeness are among the benefits when parents, grown children, grandchildren or other family members farm or ranch side by side. However, conflicts that arise among family members may develop into stressful situations.

Stress Concerns Between Generations

When two or three generations work closely on a farm or ranch, tensions may result that require attention. Consider if any of these examples are familiar to you.

- Older traditions versus new possibilities.
Example – An older father may hold fast to a traditional farming or ranching method while his son or son-in-law may push for a new approach.
- Family members in different generations stop talking to each other due to hurt feelings or frustration.
Example – A mother in one ranching family found herself acting as the messenger between family members from different generations who had stopped talking. This lack of direct communication led to even deeper misunderstandings and erosion of trust.
- Stress over an adult child’s needs for space, privacy or autonomy in doing their farm work or family life.
Example – An adult son who began farming with his parents and moved into a small home on the property found it difficult when his mother would walk in unexpectedly, point out decisions she thought were wrong or criticize his new wife.
- Misunderstanding about farming decisions or patterns of doing things, especially if a family member did not grow up farming.
Example – A young spouse new to the farm was disappointed and frustrated when she bought the family tickets to a movie an hour away and then was told, “We can’t go then, it’s planting time!”

Steps Toward Resolving Stress

In all of these scenarios, asking for what you want, listening well and working to resolve conflicts quickly can help with some of these problems. Clear and direct communication is always necessary to understand differences that may exist.

Also, allowing grown children the space they need to learn to function as independent adults is imperative. As long as emotional needs outweigh financial ones, separate households for married children are probably preferable. Further, the importance of defining individual boundaries – different traditions, activities and priorities – must be maintained. Finally, patience and understanding are called for with spouses who were not raised on the farm/ranch.

Families that farm or ranch together across generations need to prioritize developing their skills in these areas:

- Open communication.
- Building consensus and making joint decisions.
- Long range planning about changes (equipment purchases, buying into an operation, retirement, etc.).
- Being assertive and solving problems.
- Managing day-to-day decisions, work plans and farming efforts.

Ideas for Handling Family Concerns

Here are some time-tested methods of handling family concerns that may arise when farming or ranching together:

- Identify what the problem is and who is involved.
- Hold a family meeting with those involved in the problem.
- Use problem-solving techniques.
- Avoid blaming, arguing or other forms of conflict.

This series of steps has been found helpful in many stressful situations. Consider following the steps in this action plan.

1. **Begin problem solving by gathering the family and establishing a positive atmosphere, free from interruptions.**

Help family members identify the specific problem at hand and determine who can or should help in resolving it. For example, one person's behavior may be a problem to someone else because it is interfering in some tangible way with another person completing a task. (Learn to accept differences in values.)

2. **Next, identify what each person involved in the problem really wants. As a group, brainstorm all possible solutions.**

Remember these brainstorming rules: allow no criticism of any solutions until you are finished; encourage creative, new ideas; get as many ideas as possible; build on solutions already suggested.

3. **Once the brainstorming is complete, evaluate each solution by listing its pros and cons. Through compromise arrive at a consensus about the best solution.**

This means arrive at a solution all of you can live with for now. Decide who will do what, when and how. Make sure each person is clear about his or her part of the agreement. Then, put your plan into action on a trial basis, say for a month.

4. **Finally, meet again after a month to figure out what worked and what did not. It may be necessary to try another solution or adjust your current efforts.**

Six Tips for Working Together

Here are six tips for working together in farming or ranching efforts:

- Avoid blame, wishful thinking or regrets. Think about what's happening now and focus on solutions.
- Ask for what you want directly: "What I'd like from you is . . ." Remember, the other person is free to say yes or no. Seek to foster respect and consideration for each other.
- Recognize and appreciate individuals for their contributions. If you feel a need for support, ask for it and explain what you need.
- Check what another person really wants from you. This is a good way to get expectations out in the open.
- Check whether the other person heard you accurately. "Would you please tell me what you heard me say?"
- Make your own traditions. Schedule an annual family get-together at a nearby lake or other activity. Get everyone involved. Organize an activity that all can enjoy so that in the end, everybody feels good.

Conclusion

The togetherness of a multi-generation farm/ranch operation can be a source of stress as well as satisfaction. By allowing people time and space to be themselves and to do some things their way, each generation can establish its own independence while maintaining close family ties.

Key Resources for Farm Stress

- **NDSU Extension** – Farm/Ranch Stress Resources: www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/farm-safety-health/managing-stress
- **North Dakota Dept. of Agriculture** – www.nd.gov/ndda
- **North Central Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Center** – www.farmstress.org
- **FirstLink Help Line** (24-hour helpline, services, referral) – Call 2-1-1 or go to www.myfirstlink.org
- **Together Counseling LLC** – Offers in-person and telehealth farm-to-farm counseling services; counselors have farming backgrounds. Cost coverage available as needed. Call 701-404-0997 or go to www.togethercounselinggroup.com/farm-to-farm
- **North Dakota Regional Human Service Centers** – Counseling services available statewide. Go to www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/regionalhsc/
- **North Dakota Behavioral Health Supports** – To access mental and behavioral health supports in North Dakota, go to www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (available 24 hours/day) – Call 9-8-8 or call/text 1-800-273-8255 (TALK).
- In an emergency, call **911**.

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Original publication by Robert J. Fetsch, Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University

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