

## Article

# Understanding Farmers' Readiness to Develop a Succession Plan: Barriers, Motivators, and Preliminary Recommendations

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**Abstract:** Although succession planning benefits workforce development, rural economic stability, and the sustainability of a farm, few farmers in Canada have a written succession plan. As the farming population ages and fewer people enter the profession, understanding what promotes farmers to prepare succession plans is essential. Our study aimed to understand (a) the priorities farm operators have for developing a succession plan, (b) the factors that delay or motivate succession planning, and (c) the resources that would be helpful for creating a succession plan. Using dyadic multiple case study methodology, we interviewed 35 participants from 16 farms in Alberta, Canada. The thematic analysis revealed seven themes influencing decisions to develop a succession plan: legacy and identity, physical health, government policies, farm growth, professional guidance and expertise, family dynamics, and farm culture norms. From the themes, two overarching variables—risk perception and self-efficacy—shaped farmers' readiness for succession planning and informed the development of the Farm Succession Readiness Framework. This framework categorizes farmers into four types: Active Planners, Succession Avoiders, Back Burners, and End-of-the-Line Farmers. Farm succession planning is complex and multifaceted, and our findings may assist advisors, policymakers, and researchers in understanding farmers and tailoring interventions to meet their needs.



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## 1. Introduction

As agriculture is widely acknowledged as one of the most stressful occupations [1–3], there are risk management tools, such as crop and livestock insurance, that farm operators use to reduce the impacts of adverse events on their business. However, one commonly overlooked risk that could profoundly affect the sustainability of family farms and agricultural businesses is a human resource risk, namely, succession planning [4,5]. Succession planning is defined as the process of transferring the control and ownership of a farm before retirement [6]. Despite its connection with improved economic stability, clearer business direction, and enhanced well-being [7,8], relatively few farmers develop a formal succession plan. For example, a report by Statistics Canada [9] found that 88% of Canadian farmers did not have a written succession plan, which is a trend also reported in other countries [10,11]. In recent years, farm succession planning has emerged as a growing concern. As the farming population ages and fewer young people enter the profession, many farms risk being left without successors, which raises questions about the sustainability

of farms, rural economies, and agricultural productivity [12,13]. In Canada, nearly 60% of farm operators will be over 65 by 2033, representing one of the largest leadership transitions in Canadian history [14]. While there has been increased investment and a modest 4% rise in succession planning since the 2016 census [9], significant gaps persist.

Much of the existing research on succession planning emphasizes financial and operational outcomes [11,15], often overlooking the psychological and social dimensions of the process [16–18]. For example, there is some research describing that farmers develop deep emotional connections with the farm and the farming lifestyle, which make succession planning a difficult subject to discuss [11]. Other studies have described how farmers struggle to choose a successor when several family members are interested [17,18]. These issues highlight the importance of considering farmers' perspectives, as there may be a range of factors influencing their decisions to develop a succession plan. Moreover, most studies have been conducted in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom [15,18,19]. We located only one qualitative study that examined the experiences of 33 Ontario farmers [20], and it remains unclear if these findings generalize to farmers in Western Canada, particularly Alberta. As a leading agricultural province, Alberta accounts for 32% of Canada's total farmland and over 25% of its farm revenue, with operations primarily focused on beef and grain production [21]. This makes Alberta a critical region in the agricultural industry for understanding succession planning. Our goal was to understand Alberta farmers' perspectives about succession planning to address these gaps and develop strategies that support sustainable farm transitions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of Succession Planning

As mentioned, succession planning involves the process of transferring the control and ownership of a business from the retiring generation to the succeeding generation [6]. According to Kirkwood and Harris [22], this practice is used by business owners to increase the likelihood of a smooth and successful transition following the owner's retirement. In addition, a succession plan prepared in the years leading up to retirement can create a clear direction about the future of the business [23]. Furthermore, succession planning should involve the transfer of essential knowledge, including leadership skills, necessary for the business [24].

### 2.2. Importance of Developing a Succession Plan

Succession planning for farm operators is similar to the process for other business owners. However, farm operators may have additional priorities for developing a succession plan. For example, farm operators may use succession planning to keep the farm in the family. In fact, the majority of farms in Canada are family-run, intergenerational businesses whereby the farm operator passes the farm to an adult child [25,26]. While adult sons are still more commonly chosen as successors, a systematic review by Sheridan et al. [27] highlighted that continuity of the family farm often took precedence over factors such as gender or birth order. In addition, farm operators may develop succession plans to ensure their successors have the right knowledge and skills to sustain the farm. The most successful plans are developed over time [18] to allow tacit knowledge and skills to be learned through mentorship and practice [28]. This gradual approach not only ensures the transfer of essential technical and managerial expertise but also fosters the successor's confidence and understanding of the farm's unique operational and financial matters [29,30]. Furthermore, farm operators may develop succession plans to ensure that the assets are distributed fairly so that family relations are maintained [30,31]. Together, these priorities may make the succession planning for farm businesses complex. With limited research on

Canadian farmers, it is unclear if farmers from Alberta have similar or additional priorities for developing a succession plan.

### *2.3. Resources for Developing a Succession Plan*

To assist farm operators in the succession planning process, a range of resources have been developed. These resources include succession planning workbooks, seminars and workshops, and consultants and advisors [10,31]. One commonly cited resource is Vogel's [32] five-stage framework, which represents succession planning as a series of five consecutive steps where critical certain decisions need to be made: (1) the farm operator develops a retirement plan, (2) a successor is identified, (3) control of the farm begins to transfer from farmer to their successor, (4) the legal transfer of the property takes place, and (5) the successor takes control and makes changes with consideration of the family system and business goals. Although resources such as Vogel's [32] framework provide a structural roadmap to guide farm operators through the succession planning process, the rate of completed farm succession plans remains low [9]. In fact, many resources do not capture the psychological and behavioral processes that can influence how and when farm operators engage in the succession planning process.

### *2.4. Factors Influencing Succession Planning*

A growing body of research has examined the possible factors influencing the development of farm succession plans. One common issue is the perception that succession planning is a lengthy and complex process that requires years to complete [11]. Given the demanding nature of farming, with its heavy workloads and time-sensitive tasks [1–3], succession planning may take a back seat to more immediate operational priorities. Beyond these logistical challenges, personal factors such as age may play a significant role [15,33,34]. For example, a literature review by Rodriguez et al. [15] identified an inverted U-shaped relationship between age and succession planning, whereby the likelihood of planning increased until around age 80, after which it declined. This highlights the importance of initiating the process earlier in a farmer's career. Furthermore, many farmers view farming as a lifestyle rather than a career, where they develop emotional attachments to the land and have few interests outside of farming [11,16,17]. Consequently, some farmers may resist discussing succession planning, as it signals a major change in their sense of purpose and identity [16–18].

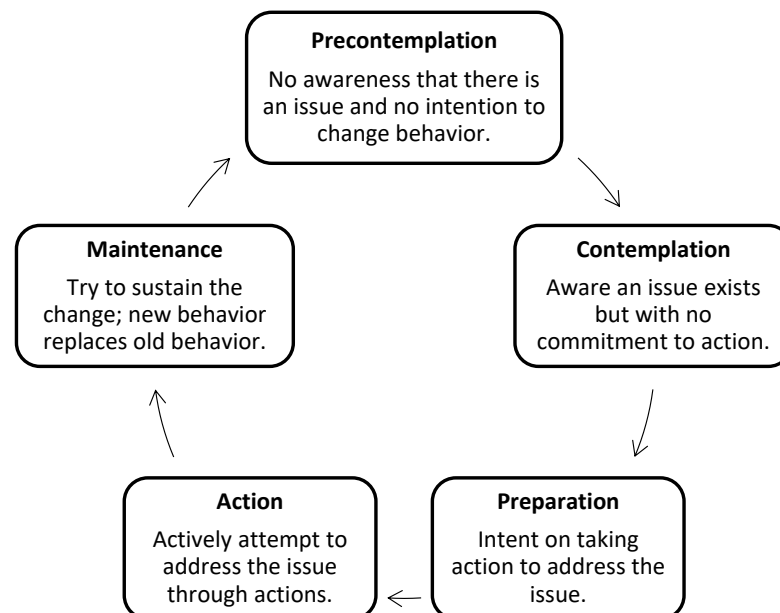
Social factors influencing succession planning may include poor intergenerational communication. For example, senior farm operators often rely on unwritten plans, assuming their children understand their intentions [16,35]. However, these assumptions frequently lead to misunderstandings. A survey of US farmers revealed that only 54% had discussed succession with someone, typically their spouse (48%) or child (34.7%) [36]. Moreover, succession planning tends to be postponed until children's career choices or life circumstances, such as marriage, become clearer [35]. Family conflicts, particularly those concerning the division of farm assets among multiple potential successors, also delay the process [17,28].

Previous research has also identified financial factors that can influence succession planning. For example, passing the farm to a family member may involve passing on existing debts and paying inheritance taxes, and some farm operators were concerned that these would create a financial burden on the successor and impact the viability of the farm [15,18]. Other researchers have reported that some farm operators viewed their farm as their private retirement plan, whereby they intended to draw income and social security from the operation well into their later years [36,37]. However, some factors may encourage succession planning. For example, plans to expand or intensify farm operations have motivated farmers to develop succession plans, as they provide a mechanism to

protect assets and ensure continuity [15,37]. This research underscores the importance of understanding farm operators' perspectives on the development of effective succession planning strategies. However, with limited research focused on Canadian farmers, it is unclear whether similar or additional factors influence their succession planning process.

### 2.5. Theoretical Framework

Succession planning is not merely a sequence of tasks but may require a shift in mind-set and behavior. For this study, we applied the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (TTM) to understand a farm operator's readiness for change [38]. By focusing on readiness for change, the TTM offers a valuable framework for understanding where farmers encounter motivational barriers and what types of interventions could facilitate their progress through the succession planning process. As shown in Figure 1, this model assumes that adopting new behaviors occurs through a series of stages. Individuals in different stages need different interventions [38]. For example, individuals in the precontemplation stage may not yet recognize the need for change, and so interventions could focus on raising general awareness rather than offering personalized support. The TTM has been applied in fields such as health [39], as well as agriculture to explore farmers' adoption of biosecurity measures [40], conservation practices [41], and adopting digital risk management tools [42].



**Figure 1.** The stages of the Transtheoretical Model.

### 2.6. Research Questions

The purpose of our study was to examine succession planning among farm families in Alberta, Canada. We sought to answer three research questions: (a) What are farm operators' priorities for developing a succession plan? (b) What factors delay or motivate succession planning? and (c) What resources would be helpful for developing a succession plan? Through in-depth interviews with farm operators and their family members, we aimed to provide preliminary recommendations for financial advisors, policymakers, and researchers to better support farm operators through this process.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Research Design

We conducted a qualitative study using a dyadic multiple case study method where at least two people from a farm family were interviewed. Because succession planning is a

dynamic process that impacts more than one person, this methodology was appropriate in allowing us to explore this topic through a variety of lenses and uncover multiple understandings [43]. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the study was approved by the University of Alberta's research ethics board (Pro00126685) on 22 January 2024.

### 3.2. Study Sample

As we wanted to gather a range of perspectives from each farm operation, participants included the farm operator and at least one other person from their farm, such as a spouse, relative, or adult child. In addition, all participants needed to be living in Alberta, over the age of 18, and produce any type of agricultural commodity.

### 3.3. Procedure

With our goal to have a sample representing various geographical regions and commodity types in Alberta, we recruited participants using convenience and snowball sampling between May 2023 and August 2023. We posted an advertisement of our study through our social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and study website. Participants contacted a member of the research team and scheduled a semi-structured interview via telephone, in person, or virtually. Prior to the interview, the researcher and participant reviewed the consent form. The researcher was guided by an interview protocol that was developed from a review of the literature and pilot tested with five farmers. Once verbal consent was granted, the interview began. All interviews were audio-recorded. When the interview was complete, the researcher asked the participant if there was someone else connected to their farm that could be interviewed for the study. We provided our contact information for the new participant to contact us.

### 3.4. Materials

The interview guide included questions about the participant's background and their experience with succession planning. For the farm operator, six background questions included their age, gender, type of farm, size of the farm, number of years the farm has been in the family, and how they came to be the farm operator. For the spouse/relative/child, three background questions included their age, gender, and how they are involved in the farm. Next, participants were asked if there was a succession plan (yes/no). Then, participants were asked three open-ended questions: (a) What were/would be your priorities for developing a succession plan? (b) What challenges did/do you face when developing a succession plan? Prompts included what barriers do they face, what motivates them, and how they choose a successor. and (c) For someone thinking about making a succession plan, what resources did/would you find helpful? Prompts included who they should talk to and how soon should a farmer start the process. Interviews took approximately 30 min. Participants received a \$25 gift card for an online retailer. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

We removed all identifying information from the transcripts before uploading the data to Quirkos 2.5.3 qualitative software [44] for the analysis. Using descriptive phenomenology, which is an inductive approach to generate knowledge and share authentic descriptions of the topic, each transcript was analyzed by two researchers. We used Braun and Clarke's [45] thematic analysis process that includes six steps: (a) getting familiar with the data (i.e., reading the transcripts and making notes about observations), (b) generating codes (i.e., identifying concepts in the transcripts that seem meaningful), (c) developing themes (i.e., identifying related codes, similarities, differences, and patterns), (d) reviewing themes (i.e.,

refining themes and reviewing previously coded data to ensure meaningful information was included), (e) defining themes (i.e., providing a label for each theme and writing a description), and (f) producing the report (i.e., presenting a narrative of the data). Next, we validated the findings by inviting three farmers to review our analysis and provide feedback to ensure it was cohesive and captured aspects of succession planning.

During the analysis process, we used bracketing to ensure that the themes were inductive. Bracketing entails acknowledging our personal and professional connections to the topic, and then working to set aside any preconceptions we might have to allow participants' perspectives to be the focus. We engaged in bracketing [46] by assembling a diverse research team where three members were from farm families and two members had limited knowledge of farming. We also double-coded all data by at least two authors, met regularly to review the goals of the study, compare interpretations, and discuss coding differences. Any coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Sample

Our sample included 35 participants from 16 farm families. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics. There were more men ( $n = 21$ , 60%) than women ( $n = 14$ , 40%). We interviewed two to four family members from each farm family. For each farm family, we interviewed the current farm operator ( $n = 16$ , 45.7%) of whom 14 were men, and one additional family member such as their spouse ( $n = 6$ , 17.1%) or a relative ( $n = 13$ , 37.1%) who was the either the former farm operator or the potential successor.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the farm operators, their farms, and family member(s) interviewed.

Farm Family	FO Gender	FO Age	FO Years of Farming	Main Commodity	Has a Succession Plan	Number of Generations that Worked at the Family Farm	Farm Size (acres)	Family Member(s) Interviewed (age)
A	male	57	21	crops	no	2	1000	son (24)
B	male	44	3	crops	written	5	9000	father/former farm operator (70)
C	male	45	10	crops	no	3	5000	daughter (19)
D	male	54	13	crops	no	2	4500	spouse (51), son (20)
E	male	53	10	crops	no	2	6	spouse (52)
F	male	65	7	crops	no	2	60	daughter (35)
G	male	48	2	crops	no	5	1000	spouse (49)
H	male	37	7	mixed	written	4	3200	spouse (37), father/former farm operator (79), mother (69)
I	female	45	16	crops	no	1	5000	son (19)
J	male	60	23	livestock	in progress	3	200	daughter (31)
K	male	38	3	livestock	no	2	660	spouse (38)
L	male	57	29	dairy	in progress	1	200	daughter (26)
M	female	61	42	mixed	no	2	1000	son (40)
N	male	63	38	livestock	no	1	1300	daughter (38)
O	male	90	50	livestock	no	1	101	son (54)
P	male	55	25	mixed	no	3	1800	spouse (53)

Note. FO = farm operator.

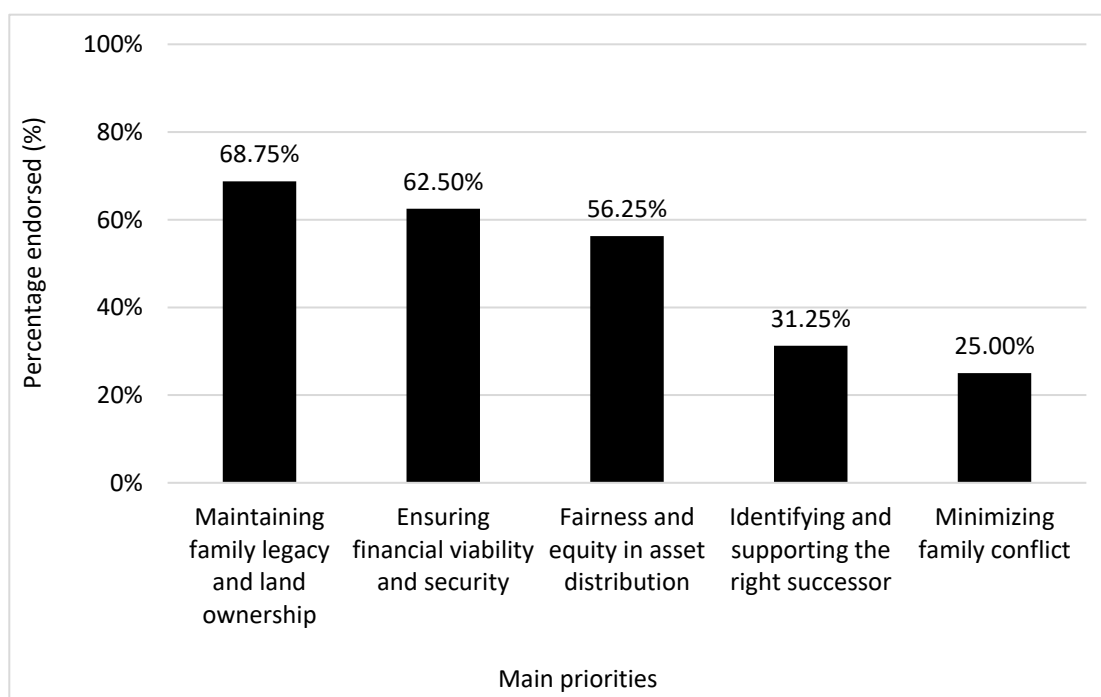
The farm operators were approximately 54.5 years old ( $SD = 12.76$ ), ranging from 37 to 90 years, and had been the lead operator for an average of 18.9 years ( $SD = 14.9$  years). Most did not have a job outside the farm ( $n = 10$ , 62.5%). Most farms were multigenerational



( $n = 12$ , 75%), with the farm being in the family for an average of 60.9 years ( $SD = 31.6$  years), ranging from 13 to 134 years (one generation to five generations). The most common commodity was crop farming ( $n = 8$ , 50%), and the average farm size was 2126.7 acres ( $SD = 2550.6$ ).

#### 4.2. Priorities for Succession Planning

We asked participants what their priorities were for developing a succession plan. Most participants listed one to three priorities. We reviewed the responses and identified five main priorities (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Main priorities for developing a succession plan.

As Figure 2 shows, the highest priority was maintaining family legacy and land ownership ( $n = 11$ ), which involved a strong desire to keep the farm in the family and retain the land that was considered valuable. This was closely followed by ensuring financial viability and security ( $n = 10$ ), entailing both short-term and long-term financial health to secure retirement funding, minimize debt and taxes, and maintain the farm's profitability. The last three priorities focused on maintaining good familial relations. For example, the third priority was distributing assets fairly and equitably ( $n = 9$ ). However, farm operators and their spouses differed in what they considered fair. Farm operators emphasized that "fair" was the "sweat equity" certain family members had invested in the farm, while their spouses highlighted that "fair" should mean equal to maintain family harmony. Fourth was identifying and supporting the right successor ( $n = 5$ ), with participants emphasizing the importance of selecting a successor who had a demonstrated interest in farming and willingness to learn. Last, minimizing family conflict ( $n = 4$ ) was the lowest priority. Participants were aware of the potential conflicts that could arise from succession decisions and expressed a desire for the transition to be as straightforward as possible.

#### 4.3. Barriers and Motivators to Developing Succession Plans

Two (12.5%) farm families had a written succession plan, and another two (12.5%) were in the process of developing one; the remaining twelve (75%) farm families did not have a plan. However, of the twelve without a succession plan, three stated they had verbally

discussed the topic with family at some point, and one mentioned their plans were outlined in their will. We examined possible demographic or business-related variables associated with developing a succession plan using a series of *t* tests. The only significant variable was how long the farm had been in the family. Specifically, farm operators who had developed or were developing a succession plan were managing a farm that had been in the family for a significantly longer period ( $M = 78.0$  years,  $SD = 35.3$ ) than farm operators who were not developing a succession plan ( $M = 47.7$  years,  $SD = 22.1$ ),  $t(14) = 2.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

The analysis of the data revealed seven themes that acted as either barriers or motivators to creating a succession plan: legacy and identity, physical health, government policies, farm growth, professional guidance and expertise, family dynamics, and farm culture norms. Themes are described using verbatim quotes.

#### 4.3.1. Legacy and Identity

The theme Legacy and Identity reflected how deeply farmers intertwined their identity, time, and emotional energy with the farm. For most, farming was not just an occupation; it became a lifestyle and legacy built on generations of hard work. As one participant explained,

All the generations ahead of us...there's blood, sweat, and tears into building this. I think we have the same dream that they have: to farm, to have a family farm. I don't know if it's something that's hard to understand if you're not in it, but there's something special about it. (Farm Operator, Family D)

The sense of continuity between generations reinforced this commitment, creating emotional ties that are difficult for some farm operators to sever. Several participants referred to the farm being larger than itself, and their continued pursuit of farming was a symbol of their commitment to their family and keeping the farm viable. For example, one farm operator mentioned, "I just think it's a good way to keep the people in your life, in your bloodstream, safe" (Farm Operator, Family F). Sometimes these ties were difficult to sever because the work consumed most of their time and limited their pursuit of other interests. One participant remarked, "My dad's hobby in life was farming...when he passed away, the golf clubs were still in the packaging" (Farm Operator, Family A).

The demanding nature of farming further complicated succession planning, as operators invested their entire lives into the work. One participant shared, "I've lived here the whole time. I've never had a job outside of the farm" (Farm Operator, Family C). This connection, which spanned five generations for several farm families interviewed, made succession planning particularly challenging, as older operators struggled to hand over the reins completely and release control to another person. What helped several farm operators transition was ensuring they could still be involved and that their input was valued. One participant highlighted this point, "[My father in-law] still wanted to be involved, and he still comes out and does spraying and seeding time and runs the combine in the fall" (Farm Operator, Family D).

#### 4.3.2. Physical Health

Many farm operators and their spouses delayed succession planning because they considered themselves to still be in good health and therefore were confident they were physically capable of doing the work. Indeed, retiring at a set age while still feeling physically capable to work seemed counterintuitive to many farm operators. For example, one participant explained:

I'll be 63 years old this year. My wife will be 60. Both of us are in good health. ...If I found out I had a terminal illness or, you know, was involved in a bad accident or something like that, then that might change my way of thinking a



little bit. But just to say I'll retire when I turn 65? I really can't say when the perfect time for myself would be. (Farm Operator, Family N)

Many farm operators expected to work well past 65 but also expected they would slow down on account of the physical limitations that came with age. One farm operator's spouse stated, "By the time you're 70, you probably need to be physically taking a step back. Like, it's just hard to do some of the work" (Spouse, Family D). Several participants shared how they were always monitoring their physical health. One farm operator commented, "We're watching our health and our physical limitations...trying to somewhat predict when we're not physically going to be able to do the work anymore" (Farm Operator, Family I).

In fact, declining physical health was often a catalyst for initiating serious discussions about transitioning the farm. As one participant explained, "[My dad] had farming in his blood and he worked right up until he just physically couldn't anymore" (Successor, Family K). Many farmers viewed themselves as essential tools that kept the farm running, believing that as long as they could function, they were still valuable. In addition to age and declining physical abilities, rapid technological advancements posed significant challenges. For example,

"What prompted us to retire was age and the ability to keep up. You just can't do it anymore. I think you can't do it anymore because of some of this technology. We can't run those machines anymore. We don't know how to. [My husband] can't go out and fix the combine. You know, we're useless." (Successor, Family H)

#### 4.3.3. Government Policies

Policies such as capital gains tax, inheritance tax, and land transfer rules weighed heavily on farmers, motivating some to secure a plan to reduce financial burdens on their successors. One farmer explained, "The tax laws are constantly changing...the more that I can keep for myself or my family and from the government, financial-wise, the better" (Farm Operator, Family B). Many were frustrated by what they perceived as double taxation, or having already paid taxes during their careers. However, when asked what specific policies they struggled with, most were unable to articulate them but nearly all explained how tax policies "felt wrong" and seemed inconsistent with their goal of sustaining a viable future for their family. One operator explained:

Well, I haven't checked it real in-depth. I mean, you've got inheritance taxes and capital gains taxes...But where I have a real hard time is the inheritance tax. In my mind, that is just a tax grab for the government. I mean, that's all the money that is spent putting together an operation. (Farm Operator, Family N)

The theme also reflected farmers' mistrust toward formal institutions, with many wanting to protect their assets. One relative explained, "My grandpa...hid the money in his basement. So, seeing a lawyer to develop a plan was not really in his wheelhouse" (Relative, Family E). For others who had started the succession process, they still viewed government policies unfavorably but also recognized how a plan would help preserve what they had built. For example, for one farm operator, having a plan took weight off their shoulders:

I think it's very important, then everything's kind of set in stone. Everybody knows what's there and where it's going. How is it that you don't have to pay taxes on it? Because I've already worked that out and done that for them. It just carries on down the line due to having a succession plan. (Farm Operator, Family H)

#### 4.3.4. Farm Growth

Farmers that were expanding or taking on new investments were often prompted to develop a plan. As one farmer explained, “Everything’s just getting bigger, you’re absorbing smaller farms all along” (Farm Operator, Family D). Participants described how increased growth, especially among crop farmers, was associated with increased risk and the need to protect their expanding assets. One farm operator explained:

When I ended up running the farm, there was definitely some succession but not to the magnitude of what I’m going to do to pass it on to my kids. I wanted to grow so I just kept taking on more and more land. . . .[So] the risk that is involved now is way higher than what it was when I took over. It’s huge.” (Farm Operator, Family B)

Another participant stressed how the farm held value even beyond active farming, “Whether we’re actually farming it ourselves or not doesn’t matter. It’s important for us to still own it. . . .because it’s valuable, and it’s just going to keep increasing in value” (Farm Operator, Family E). Expansion plans could motivate a succession plan as the next generation would have to shoulder the responsibility and debt. One participant explained, “We’re looking at a kind of expansion project on the farm with irrigation. . . .so [because] we would inherit this debt, we need to hash out a plan now” (Successor, Family J). On the other hand, smaller farms, which may not seem viable or large enough in the farm operators’ minds, often discouraged succession planning. For example, one farm operator explained, “In the big scheme of things, it’s a small family farm. . . .We have 1,300 acres that are owned or leased. By today’s standards, we’d almost be considered an acreage” (Farm Operator, Family N).

#### 4.3.5. Professional Guidance and Expertise

Farm growth and expansion introduced new risks and complexities that required careful management, as well as made specialized advice from professionals familiar with agriculture essential. Farm operators reflected on how earlier generations relied less on external expertise, which can no longer meet the demands of modern farming. As one participant noted:

Dad just knew everything in his head. . . .but the risk that is involved now is way higher. . . .I mean, don’t get me wrong, mom and dad still had their accountants, still had their lawyers, but they’re not as dialed in as what they are now. And you didn’t have as many specialty people in place that there is now. (Farm Operator, Family B)

Several farmers described the importance of having knowledgeable accountants, lawyers, and advisors who understood the complexities of agriculture and could guide their specific operation through the succession process. For the farmer operators who had a succession plan or were developing one, they had accountants and lawyers who were part of their “business team”. Many emphasized that agricultural accounting differed significantly from other industries. As one participant observed, “We want people who are educated about agriculture specifically, because there are a lot of differences compared to normal accounting” (Successor, Family D).

Although participants recognized the importance of having professionals guide them through the process, few had initiated the process beyond a general conversation. Several reflected on the amount of paperwork involved and the lengthy process that had caused them to pause. However, trying to create a plan without proactively seeking professional guidance proved to be a massive strain. One participant explained, “It was an absolute cluster. . . .I don’t recommend anybody to do it the way we did because it caused a lot

of family turmoil. . . We never had any professional help” (Relative, Family K). Several participants noted how a professional provided a structured way of making decisions and provided financial clarity for the successors. As another farmer stated, “When we took over the farm, we actually had no clue what the farm made” (Farm Operator, Family K).

#### 4.3.6. Family Dynamics

A prominent theme involved how family can play a pivotal role in farm succession, both as a facilitator and a barrier to planning. Although farming is a family business that can foster close bonds, it also introduces challenges when succession becomes part of the equation. As one farm operator explained “We’d like to do it in a way that could satisfy everybody. We’re going to need a retirement. [So] whoever is going to succeed [us], those who aren’t involved can’t be forgotten” (Farm Operator, Family D). As this quote illustrates, farm operators must navigate expectations about who will take over and how assets will be divided. Without open communication, family disagreements escalated and caused lasting damage. For example, one participant explained, “Looking back, I think it could have saved quite a bit of grief with the family to have somebody there as a mediator, because things got heated and things were said that people will regret for the rest of their days” (Relative, Family K). We identified three sub-themes that are explained below.

The first sub-theme was labeled Uncomfortable Subject. Although farm operators emphasized the importance of family and open communication, many participants admitted that conversations about succession were avoided. As one successor reflected, “It’s easy to put off. . . Nobody wants to think about the ending, right? The same as people putting off a will” (Successor, Family M). Another farm operator stated, “We just sort of put it off because we don’t even know when we want to be done with this career” (Farm Operator, Family A). These comments highlight the emotional weight of succession planning discussions—retirement, death, or the uncertainty of the farm’s future—conversations that many preferred to avoid.

Others avoided the conversations out of fear of family conflict. One participant explained, “You know, my health is good, and everyone’s getting along. . . I just don’t want to rock the boat” (Farm Operator, Family N). In all instances, the adult children wanted to discuss the farm’s future to plan their own lives. One participant explained that he found out about the farm transfer when his parents died, “Anytime I ever asked them what’s the plan, it was kind of skirted and ‘I don’t know’ or I have no plans on retiring” (Farm Operator, Family D).

The second sub-theme was labeled Expectations and Unspoken Assumptions. There was “a natural tendency to lean towards your own offspring” (Spouse, Family P) to carry on the farm, but several participants mentioned wanting to see where their children’s life paths led before “burdening” them with expectations. One participant said, “I don’t know who yet may want to take this over. Kind of waiting to see where their life plans take them when they get out of college and things like that” (Farm Operator, Family C). Many expressed ambivalences about encouraging their children to commit to farming. One participant explained, “[my father] would have supported it, but he didn’t encourage it,” reflecting a passive approach compared to the stronger expectation placed on earlier generations (Relative, Farm Family M). Indeed, the assumption that someone in the family would take over was weakening, especially as families encouraged their children to pursue off-farm careers and post-secondary education, which risked leaving no viable successor. Several participants felt their parents made assumptions about their interests, therefore missing opportunities and solutions. One participant explained:

It was just assumed because I was going to university that I didn’t want to be a farmer. But I never explicitly said that. . . There were never any direct

conversations about this. . . .It's like anything, it should be an ongoing discussion that parents have with their children, and children have to be comfortable to ask questions. (Relative, Family G)

The third sub-theme was labeled Determining Fairness. Families often delayed succession planning due to disagreements about how to distribute assets. We found that perceptions of fairness often varied by gender. One participant explained this difference:

I think it varies between my mom and my dad. My mom's priority is that me and my sister stay on good terms, and everything is split fairly. My dad's priority is keeping the farm intact so it's viable for the next generation. (Successor, Family J)

As this quote highlights, male farm operators closely tied fairness to who had put in the work and how the farm could remain viable rather than dividing assets equally to maintain family harmony. One farm operator noted, "In our situation, my son should get a little bit bigger cut of the pie because he is actively involved" (Farm Operator, Family N). For the farm operators, they struggled to emphasize that giving farm equipment or land to their successor was not personal wealth but essential resources for keeping the business running. One participant noted, "It's hard for them to see that you're not actually just getting all the money. . . .It's tools that you need to make your own living" (Spouse, Family P).

#### 4.3.7. Farm Culture Norms

Traditional farming culture tends to value hard work, perseverance, and masculinity, which may foster expectations that farmers will work indefinitely and some expectations about who should be the successor. We identified that farm culture norms entailed two main issues—identifying a successor and retirement plans—which would significantly delay succession planning. Each sub-theme is described below.

The first sub-theme was labeled Identifying a Successor. Identifying a successor required gauging genuine interest and commitment from potential heirs, though interest alone was not always enough. One farm operator noted, "Well, at the moment, I'm not completely convinced there's interest among my own kids. . . .I'm not sure how earnest it is" (Farm Operator, Family A). The unspoken process of choosing a successor was obvious to several potential successors. One participant explained how he needed to demonstrate to his parents that he wanted to farm:

I don't think it's about being 'chosen'. I think you choose it for yourself really. . . .Well, it hasn't been very formal yet. . . not a discussion where everyone's involved. But I feel like I've contributed to it enough where I've made it clear that it's what I want to do. . .and I mean, I'm going to school for it, so (laughs). (Relative, Family D)

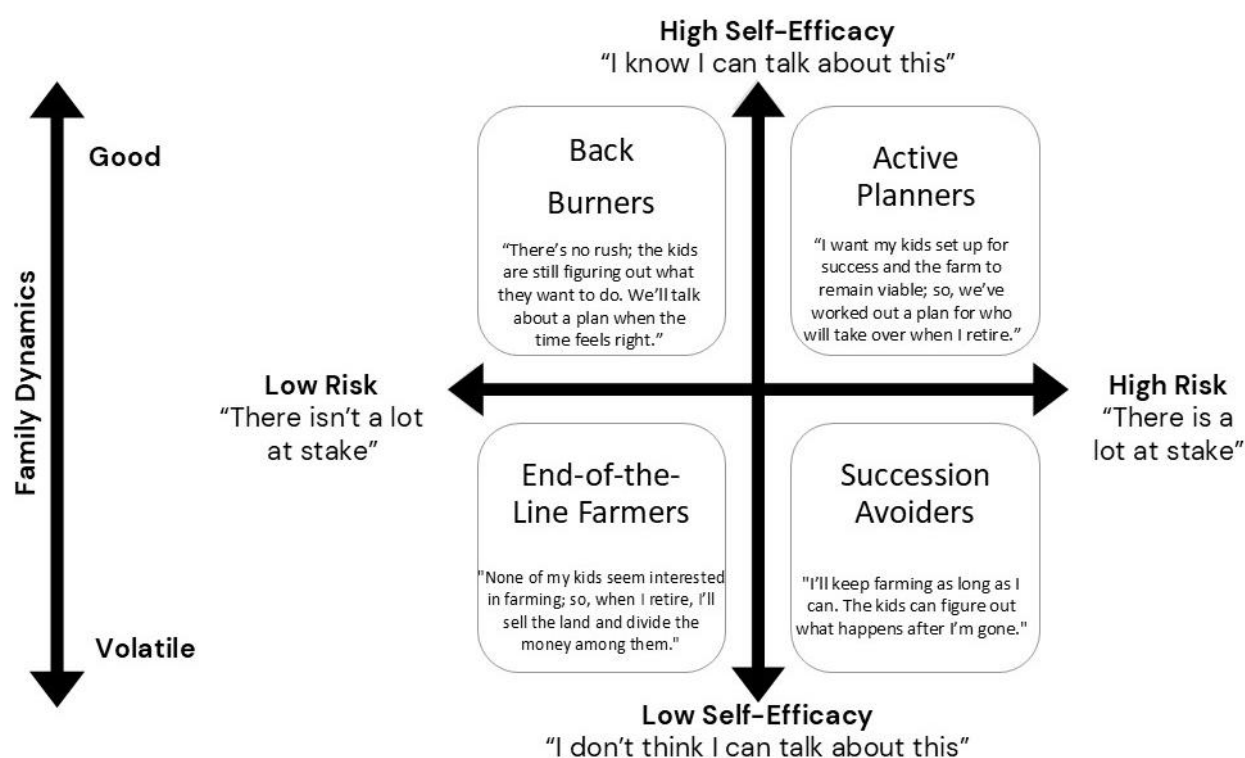
The second sub-theme was labeled Retirement Plans. Many participants viewed farming as a lifelong calling rather than a career with a definitive endpoint. One participant noted how farmers' understanding of retirement differs from other careers, "[My dad] is only 57. So like, probably not really close to retiring in farmer years" (Relative, Family F). Another farm operator shared this sentiment about no retirement plans because he could not envision himself anywhere other than the farm. He stated:

I joke with my daughters that they'll never get me to live in town as long as I can carry a feed bucket. I would not be a good town dweller. I don't plan on retiring [laughs]. I hope when the good Lord says it's time to go, I just drop dead. (Farm Operator, Family N)

Others explained that “retirement” as traditionally defined was rare for farmers, and likely needed another label. One former farm operator noted, “I ‘retired’ several years ago, but I’m basically not retired because I work every day at the farm” (Relative, Family B). Another shared how she expected her parents to remain involved in the farm, “I don’t think they’ll ever fully retire. . . mom will still want to do childcare so that I can work on the farm, and dad will always keep tinkering and doing whatever needs to be done” (Successor, Family J). For some, they despised the term “retirement” as it was seen as losing an identity and purpose, whereas others saw it as an opportunity to stay involved without the pressure of making all the decisions.

#### 4.4. Generating a Framework

We generated a conceptual framework from the seven themes to capture the dynamic process of succession planning (Figure 3). Guided by the TTM as a way to understand farmers’ readiness to engage in succession planning, we identified two main variables, risk perception and self-efficacy, that seemed to play major roles in farmers’ behavior. We called this model the Farm Succession Readiness Framework. Risk perception reflected concerns about maintaining the family farm legacy, continuing farm growth, and protecting assets. Self-efficacy reflected a farmer’s confidence in their ability to discuss succession planning with their family and have a positive outcome. As farmers varied in their perceived level of risk and self-efficacy, we represented these as intersecting variables, ranging from high to low levels, to create a four-quadrant framework. Although not a primary focus, we identified a third variable, family dynamics, which tended to operate in the background and indirectly influence how comfortable farmers felt about discussing and developing succession plans.



**Figure 3.** The Farm Succession Readiness Framework.

The framework created four categories of succession planning readiness. We labelled each category and provided an example quote in Figure 3. Active Planners (high risk perception/high self-efficacy), representing 25% of farm operators ( $n = 4$ ), understood the risks of not having a succession plan, wanted to protect their assets, and were confident in

their ability to discuss plans with their family. They proactively developed plans, had a business team of advisors, and were ready to transfer responsibility to sustain the farm. Next, the Back Burners (low risk perception/high self-efficacy), representing 43.8% of farm operators ( $n = 7$ ), did not perceive an immediate need to make a plan, often assuming they will make a plan “sometime” but are waiting to see what their children want to do with their lives, believe they are still in good health, and want to avoid family conflict prematurely. Next, the Succession Avoiders (high risk perception/low self-efficacy), representing 12.5% of farm operators ( $n = 2$ ), acknowledged the risks of not having a plan, but did not have a strong sense of farm legacy or goals to expand the farm, and lacked the confidence or desire to discuss it with family. They often planned to continue farming until they physically could not, leaving their family to manage the farm when they pass. These farmers often have a will but do not communicate what it entails, creating uncertainty for the next generation. Lastly, the End-of-The-Line Farmers (low risk perception/low self-efficacy), representing 18.8% of farm operators ( $n = 3$ ), often assumed no family members were interested in taking over their relatively small farms. Lacking confidence to discuss succession planning, they acknowledged that selling the farm and dividing the assets would mark the end of their family farm legacy.

#### 4.5. Helpful Resources

Participants specified five resources that would be helpful to support them in succession planning. First, farmers wanted trusted professions, particularly accountants and lawyers familiar with the nuances of agricultural assets, taxes, incorporation, and ownership transfer. One farmer stated, “You have to find someone that knows what they’re doing. . .not just an accountant that CAN do it, someone that has years of experience doing it, because. . . it involves everything from new wills to. . .whatever” (Farm Operator, Family F).

Second, participants perceived a gap in educational programs tailored for succession planning, especially for the next generation of farmers. Offering structured courses or even outreach classes could prepare younger farmers for the complexities of farm succession. For example, one participant stated, “If there were courses offered like that, where it really got into the meat and bones that you need. . .I think that would be very good uptake in that” (Farm Operator, Family G). There was also interest in workshops and webinars that provide essential information and facilitate follow-up Q&A sessions. For example, one participant said, “If you had info sessions that you could pre-watch or watch to gain information. . .and do it online. . .then we can have this kind of back-and-forth conversation” (Farm Operator, Family P).

Third, participants expressed a need for mediators or neutral professionals who could facilitate difficult conversations among family members during succession planning. This could reduce conflict and improve the overall planning experience. One participant explained, “having a mediator could have made things smoother, especially with strained family relationships” (Relative, Family K). Fourth, participants recommended engaging with peers and hearing about others’ experiences. One participant explained, “I know probably one of the things that helps us along the way is seeing when families do it wrong” (Farm Operator, Family D). Last, farmers wanted structured resources that simplified the process, such as guides, frameworks, or checklists, which could make the overwhelming task of succession planning more manageable, especially for those just starting to think about the process. One farmer explained, “Something just to get started. It might seem too overwhelming to even deal with at all. Maybe just a couple of questions to reflect on and that gets you going” (Farm Operator, Family A).



## 5. Discussion

While succession planning can assist farmers transition out of the lead operator role, identify successors, and ensure long-term farm viability, relatively few farmers have a plan. Consistent with previous research [11,12], our study found that only 12.5% of farm operators had formalized a succession plan. To address this low prevalence, we aimed to identify the factors that motivate or hinder farmers from initiating this critical process.

Our first research question examined farmers' succession planning priorities. The most common priorities were preserving family legacy and land ownership, followed by ensuring the farm's financial viability; fewer prioritized equitable asset distribution, identifying a successor, or minimizing family conflict. This is somewhat consistent with previous research that highlighted three common succession goals: equitable asset distribution, effective transfer of management, and maintaining family relationships [47]. The higher priority given to preserving family legacy and land ownership, followed by ensuring the farm's financial viability may reflect the recent challenges in the Canadian agricultural sector. Specifically, droughts and market volatility may have made financial viability a more pressing concern.

Our second research question examined the barriers and facilitators influencing succession planning. Our analysis identified seven factors, each potentially acting as either a facilitator or a barrier: legacy and identity, physical health, government policies, farm growth, professional guidance and expertise, family dynamics, and farm culture norms. For instance, farmers who acknowledged the physical limitations of aging, had plans to grow their operation and protect assets, felt supported by family, and worked with advisors were more motivated to engage in succession planning. Although we identified a larger range of factors, our findings align with previous research that emphasized the importance of early financial and succession planning, gradual transitions, and a strong social support network [17,18,34]. For example, Fletcher et al. [18] identified four facilitators of succession planning, including having a strong social family network, engaging in activities outside of farming, transitioning gradually, and planning early.

We also found that farmers who had formal succession plans or were developing them often had operated larger, more profitable, multigenerational farms. This is consistent with Glauben et al. [48], who reported that farm profitability, size, and agricultural education were strong predictors of succession success. Their research also noted that the likelihood of family succession increased for farms that had diversified income sources and farms that had been in the family for a long time. Additionally, we found that farmers under 60 years tended to view succession planning favorably, but this declined as they aged. Likewise, Nuthall and Old [11] observed that a longer time the farmer had been on the farm, the acquisition of substantial personal assets, and reluctance to seek external support were associated with delaying succession planning. These findings highlight the importance of early and proactive planning [11,16].

Although there seemed to be a lot of resistance to succession planning, two main factors—risk perception and self-efficacy—emerged when we reviewed our themes. Using these two factors to categorize farmer types simplified the complexity of how farmers approach succession planning. Moreover, viewing our framework through the TTM lens offered a more nuanced understanding of farmers' behaviors and needs. For example, the Succession Avoiders may have been in the contemplative stage, where they acknowledged the need for a plan because of the risk but felt unable or unready to take steps; their plan was to continue working. Further, the Back Burners may have been in the precontemplative or contemplation stage, where they may have recognized the importance of succession planning but were uncertain about the details and did not see it as an urgent matter. In contrast, the Active Planners were in the action/maintenance stage, as they were actively

engaged in the succession planning process to ensure transition readiness. While future research needs to validate our model, we provide preliminary evidence that barriers to change are both stage- and context-specific. This may explain why the current one-size-fits-all approach to succession planning has not been successful at promoting widespread behavioral change.

Our third research question examined resources farmers would find helpful for succession planning. Participants identified five key resources: access to trusted professionals familiar with agriculture, educational programs, mediators to navigate difficult family conversations, peer networks, and structured tools such as guides or checklists to simplify the process. These findings align with previous research that suggest farmers value professional guidance, educational outreach, and conflict resolution in succession planning [11,17]. For example, Hachfield et al. [34] evaluated succession planning workshops on the behavior of 524 Minnesota farmers and found that structured resources, such as detailed workbooks and collaboration with legal and financial experts, significantly improved succession planning outcomes, with 59.4% of farmers beginning a transition plan within six months. Similarly, Schlessner et al. [17] highlighted the value of peer learning, facilitated family meetings, and a list of vetted professionals. Our findings build on this literature by suggesting that such interventions would be successful in Alberta, especially if they were tailored according to the farm operator's readiness to engage in succession planning.

### *5.1. Implications*

Our findings have important implications. First, succession planning is often hindered by family conflict and a lack of open communication. Counseling or mediation services could help families have difficult conversations, identify successors, and reframe retirement or explore ways for farmers to stay involved in the farm in different capacities. Klinefelter and McCann [49] emphasized that unresolved family conflict acts like an "insidious cancer" that threatens the continuity of a successful farm business. Second, policymakers could support early succession planning through programs such as tax incentives, grants, or subsidized advisory services. For example, the British Columbia Agri-Food Business Development Program offered a cost-sharing program whereby financial advisors visited the farm to initiate critical conversations [6].

The Farm Succession Readiness Framework may be a useful tool for assessing farmers' readiness to engage in succession planning. It can help guide the development of tailored messaging and interventions to meet farmers' specific needs and circumstances. Based on our findings, we generated a list of preliminary recommendations in Table 2. While each recommendation can be tailored to farmers' needs and their readiness to engage in succession planning, the third column in Table 2 highlights the farmer categories that may benefit the most from a specific intervention. For example, Active Farmers may benefit from advanced workshops on tax strategies, while Back Burners may benefit from awareness campaigns and practical tools, such as checklists and webinars, that emphasize the risks of delaying planning. End-of-The-Line Farmers may benefit from financial planning workshops that clarify retirement, sale options, or ways to connect and mentor new farmers trying to enter the industry. Succession Avoiders, or their children, may require resources to enhance their communication skills so they feel more confident discussing possible plans and setting goals.

**Table 2.** Preliminary recommendations for supporting farmers through succession planning.

Broad Objective	Specific Goals and Interventions	Farmer Category That May Be Most Impacted
Address Emotional and Legacy Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge the emotional investment: Encourage advisors to recognize the deep personal and emotional attachment farmers have to their land. Approach succession planning with empathy, emphasizing how it honors the family legacy.</li> </ul>	Succession Avoiders: Helps to address emotional resistance and start discussions.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlight the importance of farming as a legacy: Frame succession planning as a way to preserve farmland for future generations and maintain the family's heritage and values.</li> </ul>	Back Burners, Succession Avoiders: Emphasizes the importance of planning while connecting it to family values.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide gradual transition options: Offer pathways for older farmers to stay involved, such as part-time roles or mentorship, easing their transition while preserving their sense of purpose.</li> </ul>	Succession Avoiders: Eases their resistance to retirement by preserving their identity and role on the farm.
Facilitate Open Communication and Family Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support open communication training: Provide workshops that equip families with tools to navigate difficult conversations about retirement, succession, and legacy to reduce conflict.</li> </ul>	Succession Avoiders: Builds their confidence in discussing succession topics and ways to avoid conflict.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage early successor identification: Advise farmers to identify potential successors early, keeping lines of communication open to accommodate changing interests or career paths.</li> </ul>	Active Planners, Back Burners: Encourages proactive planning by removing a major succession uncertainty.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create peer support networks: Build networks of farmers who have successfully transitioned their farms, allowing them to share firsthand experiences and provide guidance.</li> </ul>	Back Burners: Encourages planning by learning from the relatable experiences of other farmers.
Enhance Financial Knowledge and Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simplify financial processes and resources: Provide accessible tools like checklists and guides to simplify complex tax laws, inheritance policies, and capital gains requirements.</li> </ul>	Back Burners: Lowers barriers to working on succession planning by offering straightforward, actionable tools.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educate on succession-related tax policies: Run sessions to clarify tax rules and demonstrate how effective succession planning can minimize heirs' financial burdens.</li> </ul>	Active Planners: May help refine their plans by integrating more advanced financial strategies.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide succession planning grants: Establish funding programs to help farmers cover costs associated with legal, financial, or retirement planning.</li> </ul>	End-of-the-Line Farmers: Helps to reduce financial strain so that planning is more accessible and appealing.
Build Professional and Community Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage professional team development: Highlight the importance of assembling a team of specialists, including agricultural accountants and succession planners, who understand the unique aspects of farm transitions.</li> </ul>	Active Planners: Supports their proactive mindset and reinforces a collaborative strategy with experts.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer succession workshops in community centers: Host workshops in familiar, accessible locations to normalize and encourage routine succession planning conversations.</li> </ul>	Back Burners: May reduce hesitation and make planning seem more approachable and routine.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connect with new farmer groups: Host workshops or seminars to learn about programs or groups that support new farmers.</li> </ul>	End-of-the-Line Farmers: Makes connections to new farmers trying to enter the industry and looking for mentorship.
Prepare for Operational and Market Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote proactive planning for growth: Stress the importance of planning for financial management and risk mitigation as farms expand, ensuring sustainability.</li> </ul>	Active Planners: Supports long-term operational goals and ensures continuity of the farm.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlight health as a catalyst: Use discussions about the physical demands of farming to prompt early succession planning before health challenges arise.</li> </ul>	Back Burners: Encourages earlier planning by tying it to health and physical well-being considerations.

Source: The recommendations presented are based on this study's findings.

Our results underscored the need for integrated succession planning support that combines both the business and interpersonal components. One program that offers such an approach is the Integrated Personal and Financial Consulting Model [5]. This comprehensive program provides traditional financial support from trained advisors, education

about new technologies and business practices from extension field staff, and support to help families navigate and resolve interpersonal issues from a personal consultant with a social work background. A personal consultant may be especially helpful in the early stages of succession planning. The results from the program showed high farmer satisfaction, including 85% of clients stating they would encourage or have encouraged others to use the service [5].

### 5.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, we used convenience sampling, which may have led to self-selection bias, as participants with an interest in succession planning may have been more likely to participate in our study. However, the inclusion of farm families across all four categories of succession planning readiness suggests that we captured a range of perspectives. Also, we used a cross-sectional methodology. Since farm families and their businesses evolve over time, perspectives on succession planning may also shift in ways that our data did not capture. Moreover, the categories in our conceptual model may be fluid, whereby farmers move between categories as their circumstances and readiness change. Future research should consider using a longitudinal design to examine how farmers' succession planning behaviors and outcomes change over time. Second, we relied on convenience sampling. It is possible that farmers interested in succession planning were more likely to participate. Also, while our multiple case study approach provided valuable insights into family dynamics, we typically interviewed only two individuals per farm family. Interviewing more family members might have revealed differing perspectives that could enrich the findings. Finally, our study was conducted within a specific geographical context. To strengthen the generalizability of our quadrant model, future research should replicate our study with a larger and more diverse sample of farmers. This would help validate our findings and assess the broader applicability of the model.

## 6. Conclusions

Succession planning is an important process for ensuring the sustainability of family farms and Canada's agricultural industry, yet written plans remain uncommon among Alberta farmers. Our findings showed that Alberta farmers share similarities with farmers in other contexts, which suggest that the existing tools and programs developed elsewhere could be adapted for their specific needs. Our quadrant model simplified the complex nature of succession planning and provided a practical tool. Support can now be tailored to meet the needs of different farmer categories to engage in succession planning. For example, Active Farmers, who already acknowledged a high-risk perception and self-efficacy, may benefit most from targeted support through advanced workshops on tax strategies, legal transfers, and estate planning that enhance or refine their existing plans. Back Burners, who recognized the importance of planning but did not to prioritize it, may benefit from awareness campaigns, webinars, and checklists that emphasize the risks of delaying succession planning while offering manageable first steps to initiate the process. End-of-the-Line Farmers may benefit from financial planning workshops that explore farm sale options or programs that connect retiring farmers with individuals interested in entering the industry. Finally, Succession Avoiders lacked both risk perception and self-efficacy, and therefore may benefit from workshops, counseling, or mediation services that build their confidence to not only start conversations about succession planning with their families but help them shift their perspective about planning as a necessary step for a sustainable future. In summary, tailoring support to each farmer category and their readiness to engage in succession planning can help overcome the barriers many farmers face, providing a more effective and personalized approach to succession planning.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. No identifiers were used during the interviews while transcribing to maintain the privacy of the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants knew they could decide to withdraw at any point. The participants provided verbal informed consent before beginning the interviews.

**Data Availability Statement:** The interview guide and de-identified data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

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