



# Texas Sustainable Agriculture and Food Environments Program: Producer Perceptions



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## ABSTRACT

An increasing number of new and small farm operators in the U.S. are seeking technical information on agriculture and food systems. Yet, many of the new and small farm operators have limited previous agricultural experience. The technical information sought by this group varies from traditional commodities to sustainable farm practices. The purpose of this project is provide community outreach focused on topics needed by non-traditional farm operators, and discovery of problem based research questions to aid this group. This is to be coupled with an educational component featuring a completely an online master's degree in alternative agriculture systems. The initial producer-focused research survey created an opportunity for producers to identify their area of agricultural production, and to voice their perception of the challenges faced in regard to production, marketing, sales, and regulatory processes. The survey was administered through Texas Department of Agriculture's email marketing service and yielded a 65% response rate. Forty-five percent of respondents reported being located in central Texas. Of survey respondents, 45% were exclusively involved in crop production, while an additional 29% were involved in both crop and livestock production. Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported having more than ten years of experience in agriculture, while only 51% stated they had that same experience level in alternative agriculture practices. The greatest challenges being voiced by producers were in regard to meeting consumer demand, and maximizing production while abiding by certification standards. When asked about organic certification, 36% of respondents reported currently producing under organic certification and an additional 47% of respondents voiced interest in learning more about the organic certification process. These results support the idea that new and small farm operators in Texas are shifting production from a more conventional practice toward alternative agricultural techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

- Today's United States (US) consumer is afforded the opportunity to purchase products from a multitude of countries under widely different marketing labels each time they purchase food.
- Throughout the US, local and organic products have been moving off the shelf at a consistently increasing rate. Yet, looking at Texas specifically, researchers have found that producers are much slower to adopt alternative agriculture practices to enter this market (Roucan-Kane et al, 2012).
- While there has been extensive research into alternative agriculture producers in other states and throughout the European Union (EU), minimal research has focused on Texas alternative agriculture producers. For the purpose of this study, scope will be limited to producers within the state who are currently producing alternative products on small-scale operations (operations with less than \$250,000 in sales) (USDA-ERS, 2013).
- The majority of current producers are involved in warm season vegetables, grass fed beef, eggs, and low volume, value added products such as jams and jellies.

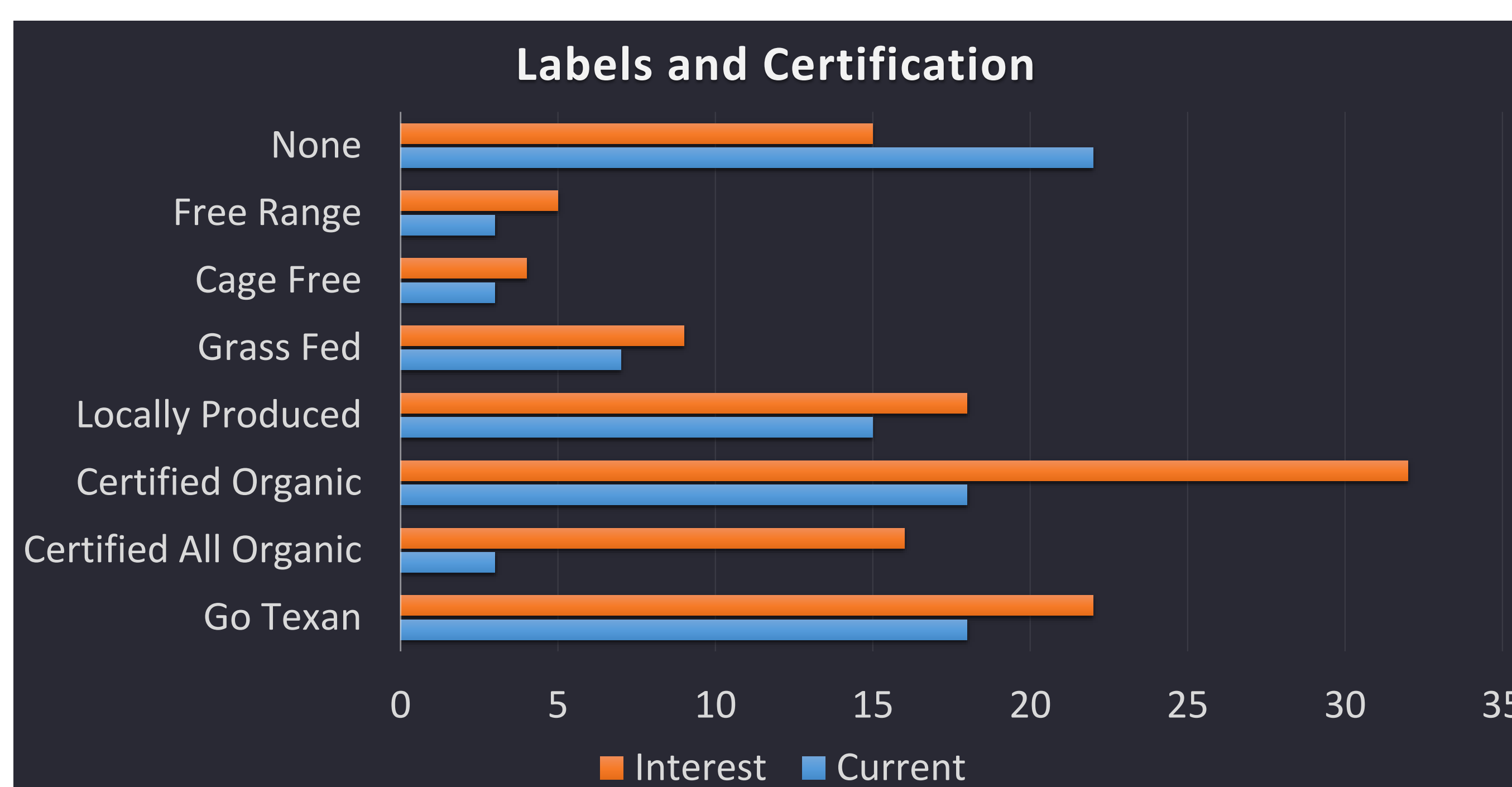
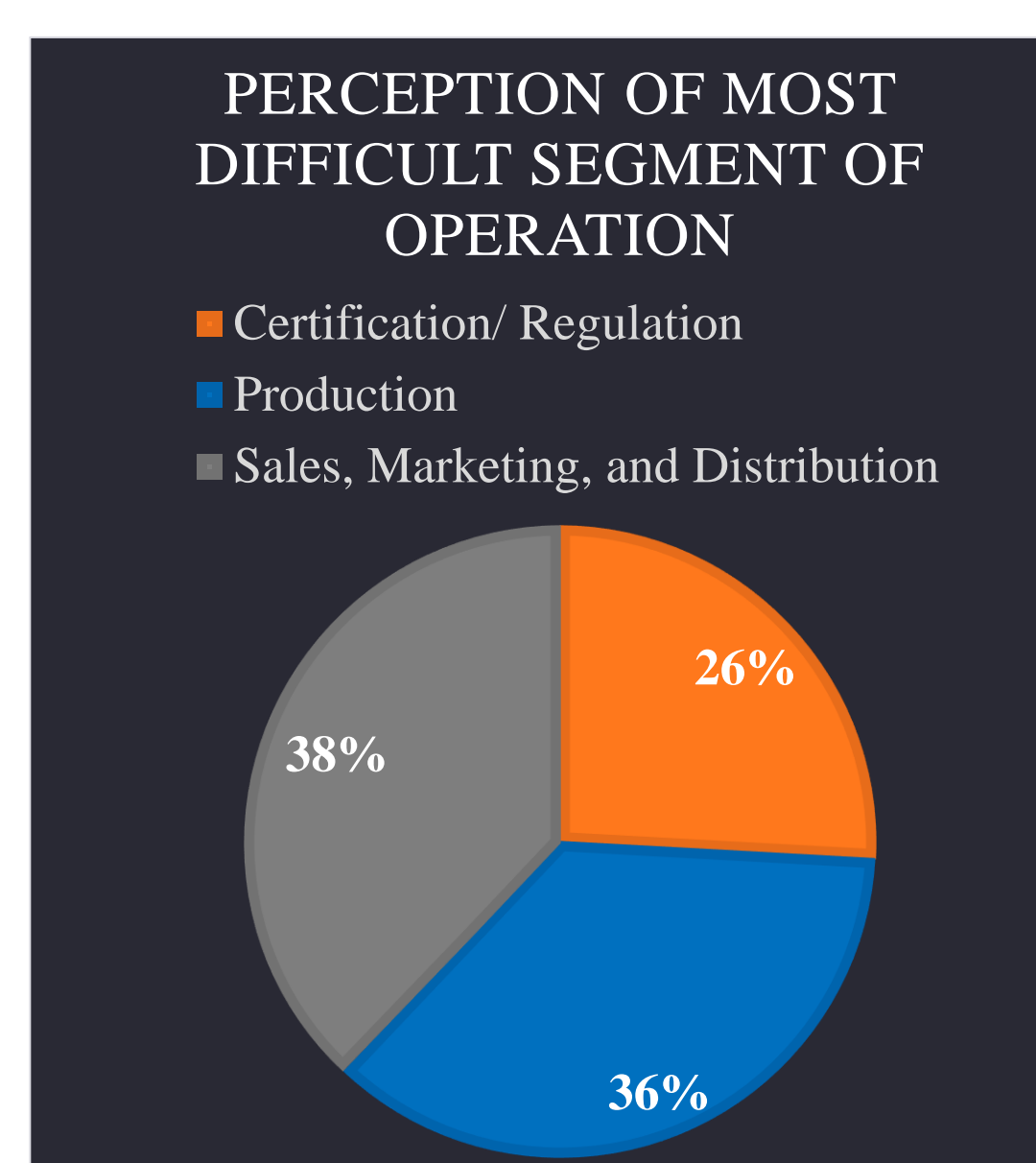
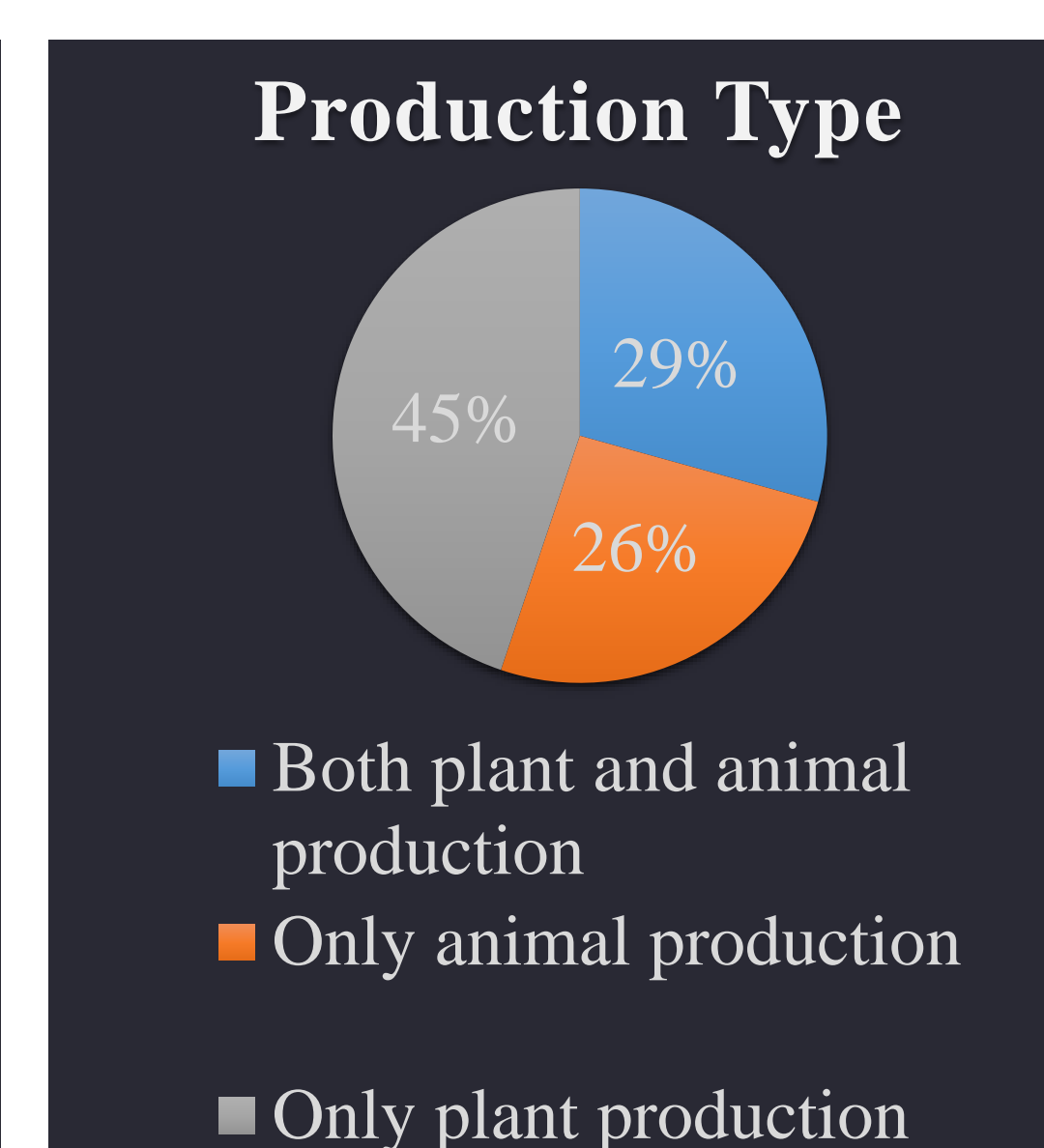
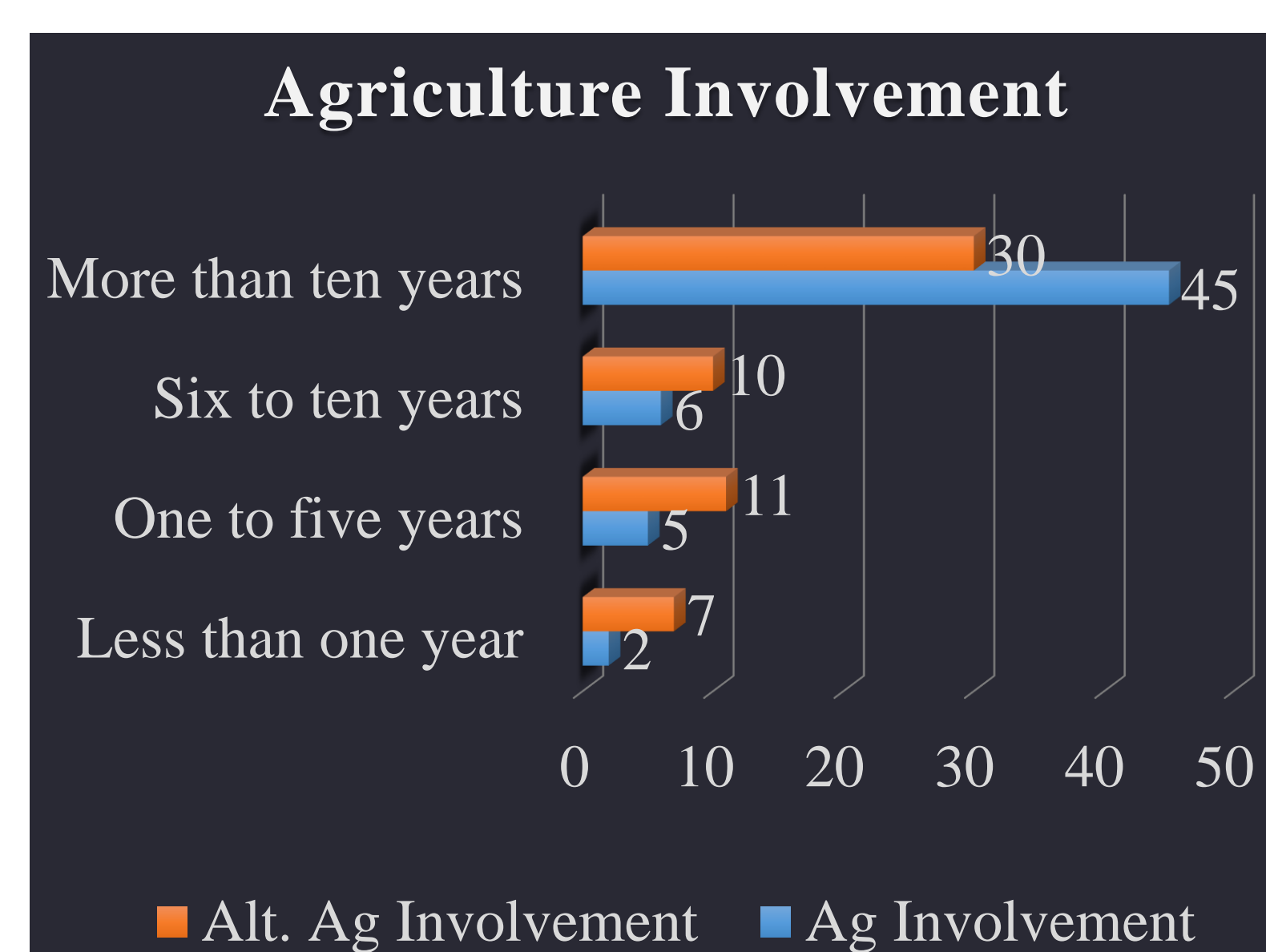
## OBJECTIVES

- Develop an initial survey of producers to determine which areas within their agricultural enterprise where creating the most hardships
- Use data collected from producers survey to inform the agenda of a regional field day event for producers, government agencies, and educators to discuss issues and plausible solutions

## METHODS & PROCEDURE

The producer survey was an online survey of Texas agriculture producers. Surveys were sent out via Texas Department of Agriculture's current producer email contact list. One advanced notice was sent out 3 days prior to the first survey letter. This communication informed recipients about the survey opportunity and that participation was voluntary. Three additional communications discussed the survey objective and contained a link to the Google Form®. After a two week communication period. Survey data was downloaded into Microsoft Excel and analyzed with Excel and SPSS. Summary statistics were calculated and used to form general themes surrounding Texas alternative agriculture producers.

## SURVEY RESULTS



## PRODUCERS OUTREACH EVENT

- **TDA- Go Texan Program Opportunities**
  - Kristin Lambrecht, Field Representative | Texas Department of Agriculture
- **Marketing Certification Programs**
  - Monty Dozier, Regional Program Leader: 4-H and Youth Development, Ag and Natural Resources, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service
- **Farmers Markets**
  - Libby Kennedy, Community Outreach Coordinator, Urban Harvest
- **Restaurant / Grocery Speaker**
  - Judy Henrichsen, Regional Director of Sales - Generation Farms
- **Alternative practices in Integrated Pest Management**
  - Ken Mix, Ph.D., Assistant Professor/Department of Agriculture, Texas State University
- **SHSU Sustainable Agriculture and Food Environment Program**
  - L. A. Wolfskill, Ph.D., Engaged Scholar/Assistant Professor of Agribusiness / Dept. of Agricultural and Industrial Sciences / Sam Houston State University
- **P-6 Farms Tour**
  - Bo Poole, Owner/Operator

## IMPLICATIONS

- Through the use of problem based research, educational outreach events are able to target specific issues concerning agricultural producers.
- The interactions between producers and industry leaders fostered new relationships and provided resources for current alternative agriculture producers.
- New producers seeking to market their products were able to observe multiple alternative agriculture practices in use and discuss the practices with veteran producers.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

- Consumers also have many selections before them that are more difficult to understand and measure as they consider social and health choices.
- With the presence of local, organic, and other associated marketing labels, consumers are also able to "vote" with their dollars based on perceived environmental, social, and microeconomic factors
- A future study will evaluate consumers within the greater Houston area, concentrating on their preferences related to alternative food products and the rate at which these consumers are informed about the products they are purchasing.

## REFERENCES

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