

Fairness Perceptions by Farmers Can Affect Agricultural Markets

Harvey S. James Jr., Mary K. Hendrickson, Hua Qin, and Rishabh Mahendra

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An Interest in the Fairness of Agricultural Markets

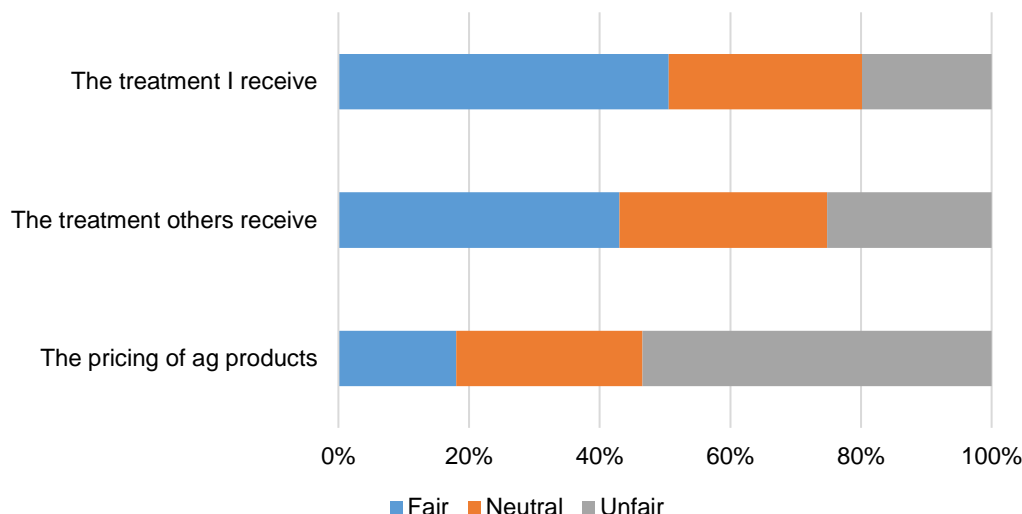
Agricultural markets have become more concentrated, mechanized, and globalized over time. These changes have resulted in significant improvements in efficiency and productivity (Fuglie, Morgan, and Jelliffe, 2024). They have also created concerns about the fairness of agricultural markets. As used here, fairness refers to how farmers perceive the equity and justice of outcomes (such as prices received) and processes (such as how they are treated by buyers or suppliers) in agricultural markets. Agricultural markets are defined here as the systems through which farmers buy inputs and sell outputs, including interactions with processors, retailers, and government programs. These perceptions can be grouped into two categories: pricing fairness (e.g., whether prices are seen as just or exploitative) and treatment fairness (e.g., whether farmers feel respected, heard, or treated equitably by market actors). We consider both categories in this article.

While fairness concerns span a wide range of issues in agriculture, we focus specifically on how farmers perceive fairness in agricultural market interactions—particularly in terms of pricing and treatment by market participants and institutions. One example illustrates this focus: The consolidation of agricultural markets has resulted in increased market power for a select few large agribusinesses, which dominate seed, fertilizer, processing, and distribution markets (MacDonald, Dong, and Fuglie, 2023). As a result, farmers—especially those with small to moderately sized operations—face limited choices and unfavorable bargaining and marketing terms (Hendrickson and James, 2005), creating situations of relative dependency within production and marketing networks (James, Hendrickson, and Howard, 2013). This can raise concerns about fairness in pricing and fairness of treatment (Hendrickson and James, 2016).

While these fairness concerns span a wide range of issues, farmers themselves often focus on how these dynamics affect their livelihoods and autonomy. For example, some farmers and farmer groups are particularly vocal about the unfairness of agricultural markets. Indeed, farmers have organized protests, testified at public hearings, and pushed for reforms aimed at restoring balance to a system they believe favors the powerful (USDOJ-USDA, 2023). For instance, in 2021, the National Farmers Union introduced the “Fairness for Farmers” initiative to push for more equitable and competitive agricultural markets (Clayton, 2021). Farmers and policymakers have long advocated for fair and competitive markets, resulting in efforts by the Biden administration to direct “the USDA to support competition and fairness in livestock and poultry markets, seeds and other inputs, retail food markets, and more” (USDA-AMS, 2022). The message seems to be that fairness matters.

There is growing interest in the study of fairness perceptions among scholars, especially economists (Almás et al., 2024). This is important because economists and policymakers have long assumed that when people believe a system is fair, they are more likely to participate and contribute (Smith, 1809; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler, 1986; Evensky, 2005). Evidence is building in support of this conjecture (Fehr and Schmidt, 2003; Miles, 2015; Hariskos, Neitzel, and Sääksvuori, 2023). That logic holds in agriculture too—at least in theory. But what do we really know about how farmers perceive fairness in the markets they rely on? Surprisingly, not much. While fairness is often discussed in policy circles, there little hard data on how farmers or food consumers actually feel about the system (see, e.g., Hellberg-Bahr and Spiller, 2012; Del Prete and Samoggia, 2023) and even less evidence on how those feelings influence their behavior. How fair or unfair do farmers believe agricultural markets are? And more importantly, how do those perceptions shape their decisions to plant, harvest, sell, or even stay in farming?

Figure 1. How Fair or Unfair Farmers Perceive Their Treatment, the Treatment of Others, and Ag Prices



Source: Authors' data.

Understanding farmers' fairness perceptions, and how those perceptions influence market behavior, is especially important in agriculture, where livelihoods, rural economies, and food security are directly affected. Agricultural markets are uniquely shaped by factors such as price volatility, perishability of goods, long production cycles, and structural power imbalances between producers and buyers. These features can amplify the effects of perceived unfairness, leading farmers to reduce production, exit markets, or seek off-farm income. Such responses may result in resource misallocation, reduced market efficiency, and weakened rural resilience. By identifying how fairness perceptions shape farmer behavior, this research can inform policies aimed at improving transparency, strengthening competition, and supporting equitable participation in agricultural markets.

This article utilizes data from a survey of US farmers conducted in 2024 and 2025 that was designed to assess farmer perceptions of the fairness of agricultural markets and how their perceptions may affect their participation in agricultural markets. The survey was mailed to 3,500 farmers in 21 Midwest states with farm sales exceeding \$25,000. The sample includes producers of both crops and livestock (including poultry). A heads-up postcard was mailed to farmers in the survey sample, followed by three waves of mailings. Of the surveys mailed, 332 were undeliverable and 725 were returned, giving us a response rate of 22.9%. We focused on farmers with current farming operations, resulting in 542 usable surveys. The average farmer in our sample was 68 years old and had at least some post-high school education; 84% were married or in a relationship, and 92% were male.

Overall Perceptions of Fairness in the Agricultural Marketplace

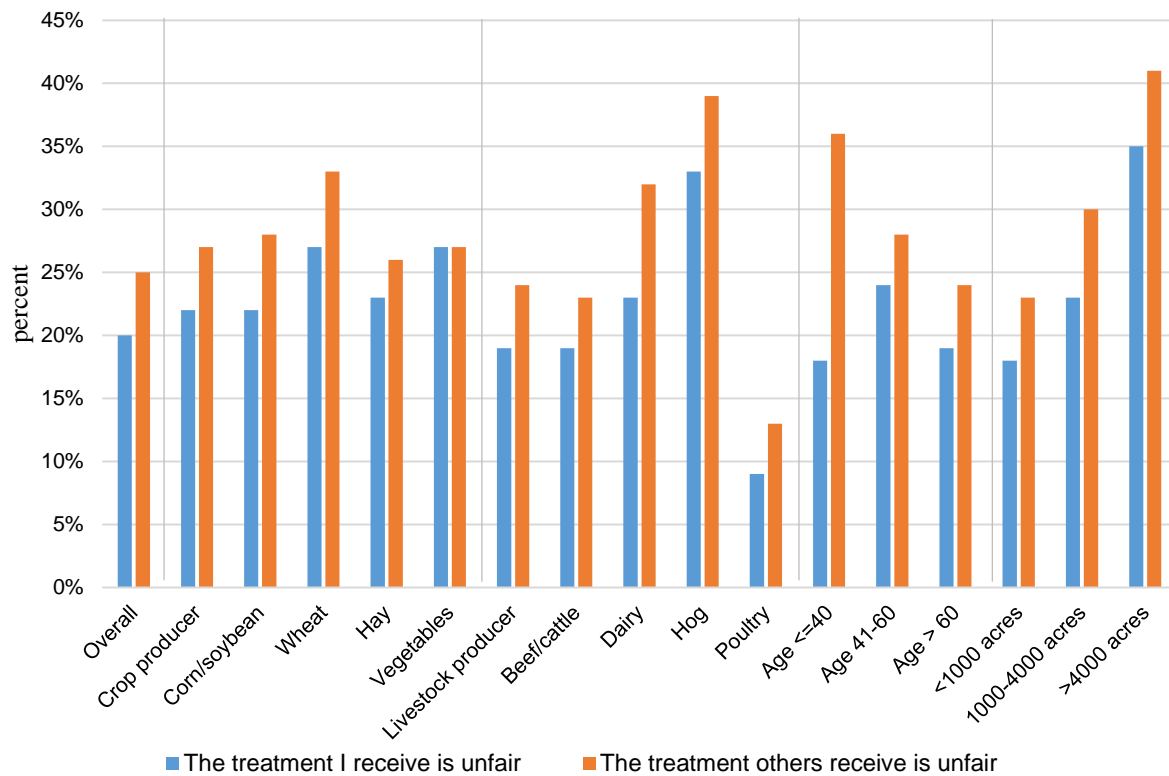
Farmers were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") their response to these statements:

- "In general, the treatment I receive within the agricultural marketplace is fair."
- "For the most part, the agricultural marketplace treats its participants [or others] fairly."
- "Overall, the pricing of agricultural products in the marketplace is fair."

Figure 1 shows the distribution of results, where "fair" combines responses of "strongly agree" and "agree" and "unfair" combines "strongly disagree" and "disagree." As shown, farmers' perceptions of fairness in the marketplace vary depending on the context. For example, about half of respondents felt that they were treated fairly, while nearly 20% believed that they were treated unfairly. These results are significant (chi-square = 78.92, $p < .0001$), suggesting a generally positive, though not unanimous, view of personal treatment. When considering how others are treated, farmers were slightly less optimistic, although perceptions of fair treatment still outweigh perceptions of unfair treatment (chi-square = 26.03, $p < .0001$).

However, the most striking result emerged in perceptions of agricultural product pricing. Only about one in five farmers considered pricing to be fair, while more than half felt it was unfair. This overwhelming sense of unfairness in pricing (chi-square = 106.50, $p < .0001$) highlights a critical area of concern within the agricultural sector (Swinnen, Olper, and Vandeveld, 2021), potentially pointing to issues in market dynamics,

Figure 2. Percentage of Farmers Who Believe That They and Others Are Treated Unfairly in the Ag Marketplace



Source: Authors' data.

policy, or supply chain practices that farmers feel are beyond their control.

A Closer Look at Farmers Who Perceive They and Others Are Treated Unfairly

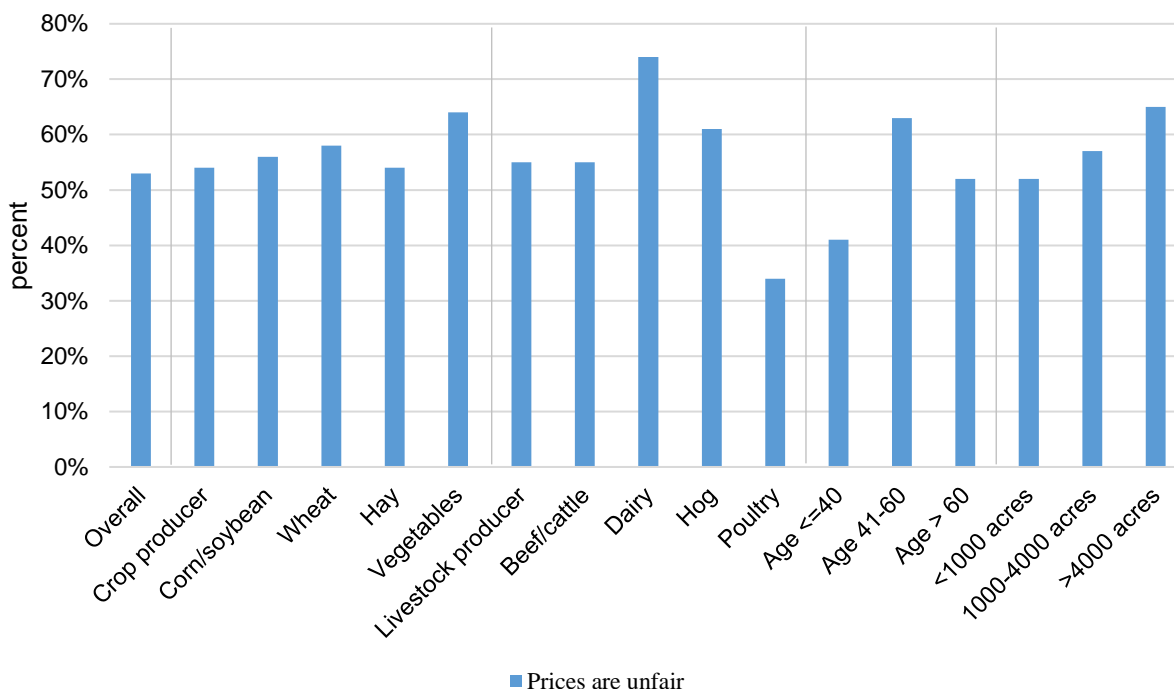
Our findings become even more interesting when we consider who perceives they and others are treated unfairly in the agricultural marketplace. This is depicted in Figure 2, which reveals differences in perceptions of unfair treatment across various types of farmers, age groups, and farm sizes. We report the percent of farmers who indicated either “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to the fairness perception statements referenced above. As noted previously, farmers overall are more likely to believe that others are treated unfairly than to say the same about themselves. This pattern holds across nearly all subgroups, suggesting a general tendency to perceive systemic unfairness more readily than personal victimization.

Our survey reveals that 22% of crop producers (N = 423) and 19% of livestock producers (N = 354) believed that they have been treated unfairly, while 27% of crop and 24% of livestock producers believed others are treated unfairly. (Chi-square results of significance are not

reported for producer types because categories are not independent, since most farmers are engaged in multiple farming activities.) Among producer types, farmers with hog operations (N = 18) stand out with the highest levels of perceived unfairness—33% feel personally mistreated, and 39% believe others are treated unfairly. In contrast, poultry growers (N = 32) report the lowest levels of perceived unfairness, with only 9% feeling personally mistreated and 13% perceiving unfairness toward others. Age also appears to influence perceptions of fairness in the agricultural marketplace, particularly among younger farmers (≤ 40 years old), who have a larger gap between perceptions of unfair treatment to other farmers relative to themselves (36% and 18%, respectively), when compared to middle-aged and older farmers. This pattern might suggest a heightened concern for broader industry issues among younger producers. However, chi-square tests of an age effect on perceptions of unfairness to farmers (chi-square = 1.35, p = .51) and other farmers (chi-square = 2.08, p = .35) are not statistically significant, suggesting that while age-related trends are visually apparent, they may not be robust across the full sample.

When looking at farm size, perceptions of unfairness by farmers (chi-square = 3.76, p = .05) and of other farmers (chi-square = 4.70, p = .03) increase significantly with

Figure 3. Percentage of Farmers Who Believe That the Pricing of Ag Products in the Marketplace Is Unfair



Source: Authors' data.

acreage. Farmers operating on more than 4,000 acres (N = 17) report the highest levels of perceived unfairness—35% for themselves and 41% for others. One explanation for this is that while smaller-scale producers may be structurally more vulnerable in concentrated markets (Hendrickson and James, 2005), larger-scale farmers might perceive greater unfairness due to their deeper financial exposure, higher stakes, or more frequent interactions with dominant agribusiness firms.

Figure 3 reveals variations in perceptions of pricing fairness across different types of producers, age groups, and farm sizes. Among producer types, farmers with dairy operations (N = 37) express the strongest dissatisfaction, with 74% believing prices are unfair. Dairy farmers may perceive pricing as unfair due to the complexity and regional disparities of the Federal Milk Marketing Order system, which can result in unequal minimum prices and limited transparency in how milk prices are determined (Bozic and Wolf, 2022). Vegetable (64%; N = 11), hog (61%; N = 18), and wheat producers (58%; N = 132) also report high levels of concern. In contrast, poultry growers (34%) are the least likely to view pricing as unfair. The finding that poultry growers report relatively low levels of perceived unfairness mistreatment and unfairness in pricing is curious, given previous studies suggesting significant ethical concerns with the way the poultry industry is organized (Constance et al., 2013). This may reflect the fact that poultry growers typically operate under contracts that do

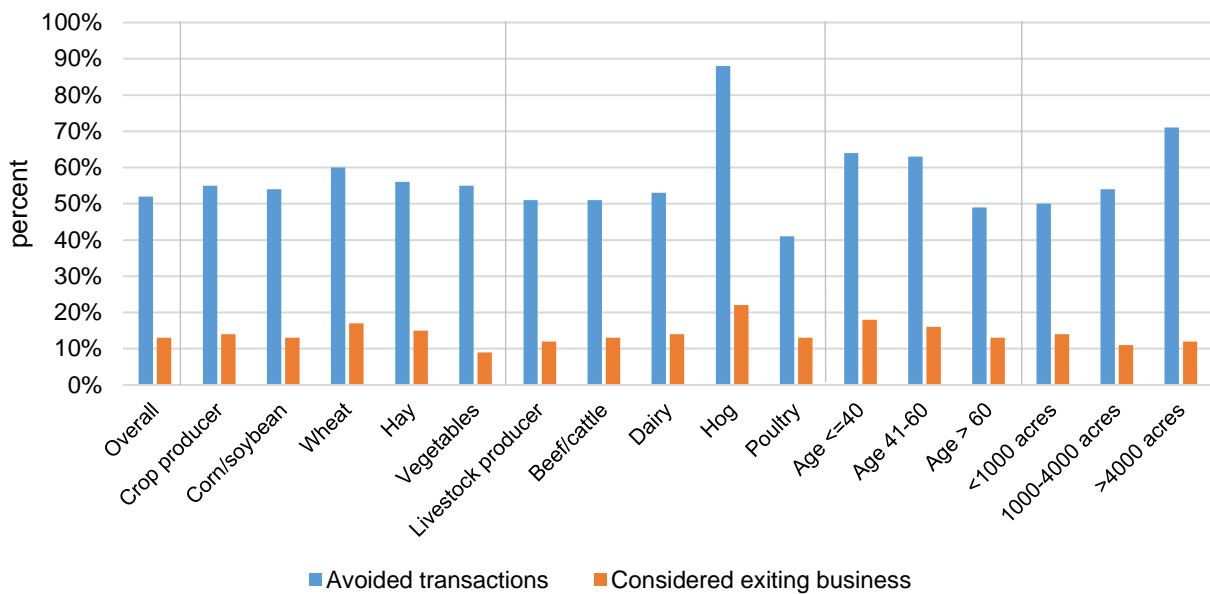
not compete on or report prices, unlike livestock, row crops, or dairy, where market prices are publicly available (MacDonald and Key, 2012).

Age appears to have a moderate influence on unfairness perceptions of prices as well (chi-square = 4.67, $p = .10$). Farmers aged 41–60 are the most likely to believe pricing is unfair (63%; N = 86), followed by those over 60 (52%; N = 433). Younger farmers (≤ 40) are less likely to hold this view, with only 41% expressing concern—possibly reflecting different levels of market exposure or experience. Farm size does not significantly correlate with perceived pricing unfairness (chi-square = 1.77, $p = .41$), although farmers operating on the largest farms report the highest dissatisfaction (65%; N = 17). A reason for this finding is that these farmers may rely more on farm income than smaller farms and may have limited access to off-farm employment and health care, retirement and other related benefits (Giri et al., 2021). This dependence could heighten the perceived stakes of market fairness.

Do Farmers Avoid Market Activity Because They Believe They Might Be Treated Unfairly?

An important question to consider is whether farmers avoid certain individuals or disengage from market participation if they expect or believe they will be mistreated or treated unfairly by others. Specifically, we

Figure 4. Percentage of Farmers Who Avoided Transactions or Considered Exiting Markets Due to Perceived Unfairness of the Ag Marketplace



Source: Authors' data.

asked two questions, each answered as either “yes” or “no”:

- “Has there been a time in the past 3 years when, as part of your farming business, you avoided certain buyers or sellers because you believed you were or would be treated unfairly by them?”
- “Has there been a time in the past 3 years when you considered exiting your farming business because you believed you were or would be treated unfairly by others in the agricultural marketplace?”

We note that the survey did not distinguish whether farmers withheld commodities or redirected them to other buyers. Therefore, the term should be interpreted broadly as a signal of market disengagement due to perceived unfairness. Figure 4 provides some insight on this.

Overall, more than half of farmers (52%) reported avoiding transactions due to perceived unfairness, while 13% said they had considered exiting the business entirely because of unfairness concerns. Among producer types, hog producers stand out dramatically: 88% avoided transactions and 22% considered exiting. In contrast, poultry growers reported the lowest levels of exit consideration (9%) even though they still had a relatively high avoidance rate (41%).

Age plays a significant role in avoiding transactions (chi-square = 6.79, $p = .03$). Younger (≤ 40) and middle-aged farmers (age 41–60) are more likely to avoid transactions (63%–64% for both groups) compared to

older farmers (49%). Farm size also varies with disengagement, with more than two-thirds of farmers with larger operations (> 4000 acres) avoiding transactions (71%) compared to half of farmers with small operations, although the difference is not significant (chi-square = 3.09, $p = .21$). Age (chi-square = 1.33, $p = .51$) and farm size (chi-square = 0.66, $p = .72$) do not have a significant effect on exit considerations.

How Fairness Perceptions Relate to Potential Changes in Market Participation

In addition to the potential for avoiding individuals or disengaging from markets, we examined whether fairness perceptions are associated with farmers' intentions to change their participation in various agricultural activities. Farmers were asked how they anticipate their participation will change over the next 1–2 years. For example, some farmers might plan to increase or decrease investment in farm equipment, expand or reduce farm size, or diversify into value-added products. We did not ask whether these changes are caused by perceived unfairness. Therefore, these patterns should be interpreted as associations rather than direct causal effects.

In Table 1, we show the overall percentage of farmers intending to increase, not change, or decrease their market participation among eight potential agricultural activities. These figures represent general intentions across all respondents. In Tables 2 and 3, however, we show how intentions differ depending on whether

Table 1. Percentage of Farmers' Indication of Change: Overall Participation

	Overall Participation			Legend % Scale
	Increase	No Change	Decrease	
Participation in primary ag markets	16	72	12	75
Direct selling to consumers	24	69	7	65
Diversification into value-added	23	72	5	55
Diversification of farm op	27	67	6	45
Expansion of farm size/scale	26	60	14	35
Investment in farm operations	42	40	18	25
Pursuit of off-farm income opps	26	66	8	15
Engagement in barter	17	76	7	5

Note: Color legend indicates the relative magnitude of percentages for each activity, where darker shades represent higher values and lighter shades represent lower values.
Source: Authors' data.

farmers perceived they were treated fairly or unfairly (as depicted in Figure 1). The values in Tables 2 and 3 represent changes from the baseline percentages reported in Table 1, highlighting how fairness perceptions are associated with deviations from overall patterns. We present this information in the form of a heat map, which uses different colors to represent different values in a table, so readers can quickly see patterns, trends, and outliers in complex data (where a percentage scale shows at what level the “heat” or color changes).

Overall, most farmers do not intend to change their market participation in the near future. At least for most of the activities presented, on average two-thirds of farmers report no intention of changing their market participation. Interestingly, investment in farm operations stands out as the most dynamic area. It has the highest percentage of farmers intending to increase participation (42%), indicating a strong interest in reinvesting in infrastructure, equipment, or technology. However, it also has the highest percentage intending to decrease participation (18%), suggesting a polarized response—

while some farmers are optimistic and expanding, others may be scaling back due to financial pressures or uncertainty.

Table 2, also presented in the form of a heat map, reveals how farmers' intentions to change their participation in various agricultural activities differ depending on whether they perceived that the treatment they received was unfair (left side table) compared those who perceived fair treatment in the marketplace (right side table). The data are presented as deviations from values reported in Table 1.

Farmers who perceived unfair treatment in the agricultural system report intentions that differ from those who perceived fair treatment. For example, they are less likely to plan increased investment in operations (12 points lower) and more likely to consider pursuing off-farm income (12 points higher). Similar patterns appear across activities such as diversification and direct selling, where decreases are more common among those perceiving unfairness. These patterns suggest that farmers who perceive unfairness are more likely to

Table 2. Change in Percentage of Farmers' Intentions for Market Participation: Perceived Unfair and Fair Treatment

	Perceived Unfair Treatment			Perceived Fair Treatment			Legend % Scale
	Increase	No Change	Decrease	Increase	No Change	Decrease	
Participation in primary ag markets	1	-10	9	-1	2	-1	10
Direct selling to consumers	-1	-7	8	0	2	-2	6
Diversification into value-added	-1	0	1	1	-1	0	3
Diversification of farm op	-4	-4	8	1	0	-1	0
Expansion of farm size/scale	-1	-2	3	1	0	-1	-3
Investment in farm operations	-12	7	5	3	-2	-1	-6
Pursuit of off-farm income opps	12	-13	1	-3	3	0	-10
Engagement in barter	-1	-1	2	0	1	-1	

Note: Values show percentage-point differences from Table 1; negative = lower intention, positive = higher.
Source: Authors' data.

Table 3. Change in Percentage of Farmers' Intentions for Market Participation: Perceived Unfair and Fair Prices

	Perceived Unfair Prices			Perceived Fair Prices			Legend
	Increase	No Change	Decrease	Increase	No Change	Decrease	% Scale
Participation in primary ag markets	1	-4	3	-2	4	-2	10
Direct selling to consumers	2	-4	2	-2	4	-2	6
Diversification into value-added	-4	3	1	6	-5	-1	3
Diversification of farm op	0	-1	1	0	0	0	0
Expansion of farm size/scale	1	-1	0	0	0	0	-3
Investment in farm operations	-1	0	1	1	-1	0	-6
Pursuit of off-farm income opps	5	-6	1	-6	8	-2	-10
Engagement in barter	-1	-1	2	0	3	-3	

Note: Values show percentage-point differences from Table 1; negative = lower intention, positive = higher.

Source: Authors' data.

report intentions that could signal disengagement, although other factors—such as prior investments or market conditions—may also influence these decisions. In contrast, farmers who believed they have been treated fairly signal intentions toward more stability, with slight increases in investment and diversification, and fewer decreases overall.

Table 3 also presents deviations from values in Table 1 for intention to change different farming activities, this time comparing farmers who perceived agricultural prices are unfair (left side table) with farmers who perceived that agricultural prices are fair (right side table). Farmers who perceived agricultural prices as unfair tend to shift their behavior in ways that reflect caution and a search for alternative income. They are more likely to pursue off-farm income opportunities, with a 5-point increase in that intention, and show reduced interest in value-added diversification, which drops by 4 points. These farmers also exhibit a general pattern of decreased stability, with more modest increases in intentions to decrease participation across several activities. In contrast, those who view prices as fair are more inclined to invest in value-added diversification and are generally more stable in their plans.

These findings suggest that perceptions of unfairness—whether in treatment or pricing—are not merely abstract grievances but are associated with differences in farmers' intentions and outlook. Farmers who feel unfairly treated or underpaid are more likely to reduce investment in their operations, scale back participation in conventional markets, and pursue off-farm income opportunities. In contrast, those who perceive fairness tend to show greater stability and a willingness to engage in value-added or innovative activities. Together, the data point to the potential for a broader behavioral shift in which dissatisfaction with fairness is prompting some farmers to disengage from traditional agricultural pathways in favor of more adaptive or supplemental strategies.

Implications

These results suggest two key highlights. First, pricing is the most widely perceived source of unfairness. Across all categories, agricultural product pricing is viewed as the most unfair aspect of the marketplace. Over half of all farmers believe pricing is unfair, but this perception rises among dairy producers and large-scale farmers. This suggests that pricing mechanisms are a central concern and may be a key driver of broader dissatisfaction.

Second, perceptions of unfairness are associated with reduced market participation. Farmers are not just dissatisfied. They signal strong inclinations to change their behavior in response. This is especially pronounced among hog producers, indicating that perceived inequities are having real economic consequences. Furthermore, there are clear behavioral shifts in market participation due to unfairness perceptions. Farmers perceiving unfairness are more likely to pursue off-farm income and to reduce participation in primary agricultural markets and direct-to-consumer sales.

Overall, the implications of market unfairness are clear. Perceptions of unfairness can potentially affect competition and efficiency. These perceptions—whether rooted in actual disparities or misperceptions—can distort decision-making and erode trust in the system. In agricultural markets, where sustainability and equitable participation are critical, such dynamics are especially consequential. When farmers and other stakeholders believe the system is fair, they engage actively and contribute productively. However, when fairness is in doubt—due to pricing disparities, market concentration, or unequal treatment—confidence declines, and resource misallocation may follow. Understanding why claims of unfairness arise, and whether they are valid, is therefore a vital step toward fostering a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable agricultural marketplace.

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About the Authors: Harvey S. James, Jr. (hjames@missouri.edu) is a Professor and Director with the Division of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Missouri. Mary K. Hendrickson (HendricksonM@missouri.edu) is a Professor with the Division of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Missouri. Hua Qin (qinh@missouri.edu) was an Associate Professor with the Division of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Missouri at the time the research was conducted. Rishabh Mahendra (rishabhmahendra@missouri.edu) is a Post-Doctoral Fellow with the Division of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Missouri.

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