

A robust agricultural economy has shielded many rural Nebraskans from the worst of the recession, and the Nebraska Rural Poll shows a majority believe they're better off today than five years ago and many are confident conditions in their lives will continue to improve.

The 16th annual University of Nebraska-Lincoln poll, taken in March and April, details responses from 2,490 households in the state's nonmetropolitan counties.

Fifty-two percent of poll respondents said they believe they are better off than they were five years ago, up from 50 percent last year and the second highest proportion in the poll's history.

There also was a slight decrease—from 21 percent to 18 percent—in the percentage of people who believe they are worse off than they were five years ago.

A slight increase also was seen this year in the percentage of people who think they will be better off 10 years from now—from 42 percent in 2010 to 45 percent this year. About 20 percent said they expect to be worse off, down from 23 percent in 2010.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents involved in agriculture said they were better off or much better off than they were five years ago, leading the eight professional demographic groups.

Just 43 percent of those involved in construction, installation or maintenance felt that way.

As to the question about how they expected to be doing 10 years from now, though, 45 percent of those involved in agriculture said they expected to be better off or much better off. That compares to 58 percent of those involved in health care support, public safety and sales and office support.

The 2011 poll also showed rural Nebraskans consider themselves entrepreneurial. Fifty-seven percent rated themselves somewhat or very entrepreneurial.

Thirty percent said they were somewhat or very non-entrepreneurial.

Respondents in communities with fewer than 500 people were more likely than those in communities with populations of 1,000 to 4,999 to consider themselves entrepreneurial—64 and 54 percent, respectively.

Connie Reimers-Hild, UNL Extension educator in entrepreneurship and innovation, noted entrepreneurship is defined more broadly than starting and running one's own business.

"I think we tend to believe entrepreneurs are more common in metro areas," she said. "But there are other things happening out there, and there's a lot of potential out there."

"It goes beyond starting a business to finding some creative solutions to doing some things new or different in their communities," she said.

Following past years' trends, rural Nebraskans are most satisfied with their marriages, families, friends, religions/spirituality and the outdoors.

They remain less satisfied with job opportunities, current income levels and financial security during retirement.

In the past year, though, there was an increase in satisfaction with income level, from 50 to 55 percent, the second highest percentage in the poll's 16-year history.

And satisfaction with financial security during retirement increased from 32 to 38 percent from 2010 to this year. However, satisfaction with job opportunities decreased from 42 to 38 percent.

In another finding, 53 percent of respondents said they are leaders in their work/career.

Twenty-five percent described themselves as leaders in social organizations and activities, and 14 percent consider themselves leaders in their local community.

Brad Lubben, UNL Extension public policy specialist, noted a theme that ran through much of the 2011 Rural Poll's findings on a variety of topics. Education is central to satisfaction,

economic development, and technology access. The Rural Poll team likes to describe this as the project's "stay in school message."

"Education affects everything in your life," said Randy Cantrell, rural sociologist with the Nebraska Rural Initiative.

The Rural Poll is the largest annual poll of rural Nebraskans' perceptions on quality of life and policy issues.

This year's response rate was about 39 percent. The margin of error is plus or minus two percent.

Complete results are available online at [ruralpoll.unl.edu](http://ruralpoll.unl.edu).