



Access to Farmland Is a Challenge for New Farmers

Shelley Butler Barlow

Co-owner/co-manager/ Secretary, Cotton Plains Farm, Inc.
Cotton Plains Farm Facebook page



Shelley S. Butler Barlow farms with her husband Joseph Barlow, Jr., his father and their son at Cotton Plains Farm, located in Chuckatuck, Virginia. Butler Barlow graduated Western Branch High School in 1978 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture from Virginia Tech in 1982. Shelley has worked in many different segments of agriculture for nearly 40 years. In addition to her responsibilities as a Suffolk City Council member, Shelley serves as President of the Board of Directors for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and is a member of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors. She is a 2016 fellow of Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) and represents Virginia Agriculture nationally with the Cotton Board Research and Promotion program. In the community, Butler Barlow is a member of Wesley Chapel UMC, Possum Hollow Ruritan Club, Nansemond Farm Bureau Ag Education committee, Suffolk Meals on Wheels (Board of Directors), and serves on the Suffolk FSA county committee. She is also Director of Healthy Food Initiatives for Healthy Suffolk, advising local school and community garden projects.

Tell us about your farm?

We farm about 850 acres in Suffolk City and Isle of Wight County in Virginia.

How many men and women do you employ to work on your co-own farm?

Our employees are two men and one woman.

What is your role on the farm?

I currently manage all finances and record-keeping. Ten years ago my husband and I allocated all the field work such as planting/crop management/harvesting. After hiring our son, I do less field work but still assist and play a major role during harvest season.

Being the owner of a farm does it empower you to take major decisions on it?

Yes. I am involved in all major decision making.

Tell us about your key accomplishments.

Being selected to serve on the Virginia Cotton Board and then being appointed to represent Virginia at the National level on the Cotton Board.

If the clock is rewound is there something you would do better for the sector?

I have served the industry as best I could.

Do you have a role model who inspired you?

I grew up in a family of strong women and while they were/are not involved in agriculture, they all have had successful careers and inspired me to work hard in my chosen profession.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

My plan was to become a veterinarian but after my experience in the College of Agriculture at Virginia Tech, I changed direction and have been involved in agriculture throughout my entire career.

What in your view are the main gender-specific obstacles in cotton production and what you think can be done to overcome them?

In their order of importance, the key constraints are:

- Access to land
- Timely availability of labour for farm operations,
- Financing and
- Agricultural training

Because my husband and I co-own and manage our farm, I have not had many business interactions as an independent female operator. I have had the experience of having to convince someone that I am actually a farmer or that I actually

operate machinery and do other traditional 'male' jobs around the farm. I have very often been in situations where it was assumed that my role on the farm was limited to traditional 'female' jobs. I also married into an existing family farming operation. Starting a new farming operation (for women or men) is very challenging for all of the reasons listed above.

What are the main challenges?

Access to farmland is a challenge for new farmers. Retention of farmland by existing operators also includes many challenges, from development and other commercial uses, other farmers, other family members (transitioning from one generation to the next), to the generally low margins/profitability that makes successful farming difficult.

Did you face any discrimination being a woman farmer?

Mainly doubts about my credibility and experience as a farmer.

What do you have to do, as a woman, to ensure work-home balance?

Making sure that everyone on our farm understands that all jobs can be done by everyone and that no jobs are exclusively male or female including both farm and household jobs. I also try to protect time reserved for other activities so we all have non-farm activities as well as down time to rest and relax. This is hard to achieve during planting and harvest!

What can the ICAC do to support women in the cotton industry?

It's important to know that other women are involved in the industry and to learn about their experiences. There are so few of us, it's good to know that we're not alone in the work we do as women in agriculture.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC