

Land Stewardship Project Farm Transition Profile: Leaving an Organic Legacy

By Alex Baumhardt

Craig Murphy, 58, brushes the dust off an aerial photo of his farm from the late 1980s. He sets it on his kitchen table in the home that five generations of Murphys have grown up in near the west-central Minnesota community of Morris and uses his finger to draw a map on it. He points to different structures and fields to explain what has changed and what has remained. He draws imaginary borders outside of the frame to create a picture of how the community and his neighbors' farms have changed since he got started as one of the first certified organic farmers in the area. As he talks about potentially transitioning his land to non-family for the first time in its history, his words draw a broad, borderless image where anything seems possible.

Pioneering Roots

Murphy's great-grandparents started the homesteading process in Morris in 1876 and eventually raised 12 children on the same land Murphy farms today. The torch was passed from Murphy's great-grandfather, to his grandfather, to his father, to him. They were the ones that wanted to stay on the land and farm it; everyone else left. His great-grandparents and grandparents had horses,



pasture, diversified crops and livestock; they understood that all of those things were critical to supporting the health of the soil they relied on.

Murphy's father, Ray, farmed wheat, corn, soybeans and alfalfa. But after high school, Craig's original goal was to become a veterinarian, and he eventually got an animal science degree from the University of Minnesota. After school, he moved 300 miles south to Battle Creek, Neb., to sell services and supplies for a co-op. He lasted eight months before the farm in Morris wooed him back equipped with a different mentality towards his relationship with the land.

"I just didn't want to deal with a jug that had a skull-and-crossbones on it," Murphy says. "I just thought there's got to be a more natural way. And I kind of wanted the challenge of it too, to see if I could make [organic] work."

Soon after returning to the farm in 1980, Murphy talked to his father about farming organically. Through other farmers and newsletters, Murphy had heard about the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (NPSAS), a grassroots educational and advocacy organization that helps farmers in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Montana, Iowa, Wyoming and Nebraska transition to organic. Murphy attended a conference NPSAS was holding in North Dakota, where he met Gary Ehlers, an organic crop grower who lived 30 miles from Morris. Ehlers served as the young farmer's mentor throughout the development of his organic dream.

Murphy's father was open to the idea of his son coming back to farm and offered to help him get started with 80 acres and a barn in exchange for help on the other 800 acres of owned and rented land he worked at the time. Murphy used the 80 acres to raise hogs, soybeans and alfalfa. Ray Murphy shared what machinery he could and an uncle loaned Murphy the money to buy the rest of the implements he needed. By 1983, the 80 acres was certified organic. Through NPSAS, Murphy connected with a company that was willing to buy his entire organic production and market it. Today, he either direct-markets it himself or uses a broker and marketing agent through the National Farmers Organization.

Over the years, Murphy increased the amount of land he rented from his father and a neighboring farm until he had 450 acres certified organic. His father retired from farming in 1987 and Murphy decided to transition out of hogs and into organic beef cattle, which he raised for 25 years, along with a diversity of crops. Murphy got rid of his cattle operation in 2011 and now grows organic wheat, rye, sunflowers, flax, soybeans and corn.

Murphy doesn't regret his decision to go organic, but concedes there are challenges on a day-to-day basis: weeds; managing an organic fertility program and an insect-control program; and dealing with rain that turns your soil into a swamp.

Murphy's conventional neighbors look at what he's up against, "And they're like, 'No way,'" he says. They respect what he's doing and one of his neighbors even helps with Murphy's harvesting but, "They see it all; they don't want to go organic. With all of the technology at their disposal they're making it [conventional] look pretty good, and if you don't get in too close, if you don't think about the GMOs, it does look pretty good."

Farm Transitions

Ray Murphy passed away in 2011 and with that, his family went through a puzzling land transition. The elder Murphy had 240 acres in his name, and it was split-up between Craig and his seven siblings. Murphy had been renting some of that land from his father, and he had transitioned it to organic. His brothers and sisters all decided to sell their shares and, while Murphy would have loved to have purchased that land from them, it would have cost upwards of \$1.3 million. He bought 11.8 acres from his siblings at a discounted price, as well as 32 acres of his father's pasture and 15 acres of Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) land. The CREP land has to stay in grassland in exchange for a yearly rental payment from the Farm Service Agency that Murphy will receive until 2016. Although

some of the land Murphy's father put into CREP was tillable, he did it to promote diversity on his property. Murphy is glad his father did it and proud to now own that land himself. "I don't mind having that kind of diversity," he says, "It's okay not to farm every square inch."

Today, Murphy owns 145 acres of tillable land and rents 150 acres from his uncle—all of it is certified organic. The land his siblings didn't sell to him immediately lost organic status to the new owners, who are growing wheat and sugar beets conventionally. On a recent summer day Murphy watches the land that used to be organic getting sprayed with chemicals several fields away from his rye. "I've seen this happening quite a bit," Murphy jokes sardonically, "so, I think we can say that it is officially not organic anymore."

That clearly troubles him. Even with all of the challenges and rocky transitions, Murphy has an organic or bust attitude. "If I couldn't have done organic," he says, "I wouldn't have farmed. I wouldn't have the heart for it."

In order to avoid a situation like this, where his land is one day sold to the highest bidder rather than the best caretaker, Murphy is already looking to begin transitioning it. Through the Land Stewardship Project and other networks, he's seeking a farming family interested in getting a foothold in agriculture. Murphy is open to any ideas and enterprises that a new farmer has in mind, and, because he's starting the transition process early, he's hoping to find someone with an organic enterprise to keep the land chemical-free. "I'm not old," Murphy says. "I just don't want to start something new without help." He's hoping within 10 years to start renting tracts of his land gradually so that his control of the farm diminishes while a new farmer takes the reins.

"Whoever would come here would have to, first of all, love the area," Murphy says. Ideally, they would spend a season working with Murphy on the land, and then come up with a project of their own. They'd need to develop an enterprise and business plan that could support them whether that's a Community Supported Agriculture operation, greenhouses or a livestock enterprise.

"What we have right now is supporting one family, so they'd have to develop something else that could support another person or family though the transition," Murphy says.

In return for all of this, they would get a discounted rental rate and the benefit of Murphy's 30-plus years of experience, his support and the use of his equipment. Murphy believes that every beginning farmer could benefit from a Gary Ehlers to mentor them and someone like his dad to give them a chance to get started on some land. He hopes he could be both.

"Most older famers want to see younger farmers on the land, because the alternative is just more factory farms," he says.

Alex Baumhardt served a Farm Beginnings journalism internship in 2013.