

Perspectives from the Land Stewardship Project:

Since 2010, Land Stewardship Project (LSP) staff members have talked to hundreds of beginning and retiring farmers and professionals about transitioning land to the next generation of farmers. During these visits, a few questions consistently emerged:

- Retiring farmers were saying, “I know I should be doing some planning for the future; where do I start? Are there *really* beginning farmers who want to farm?”
- Both beginning and retiring farmers asked “How do we find each other?”
- Financial planners said, “I wish I had more tools for clients thinking about next steps with their land– what are people doing and what is working?”

In response to these questions, LSP envisioned this toolkit to share the best examples and resources available for farmers and landowners who are seeking to transition their land to a beginning farmer.

LSP continues to work to better understand what is needed for farmland to be transitioned to the next generation of farmers. There are many challenges facing farmers today. Some solutions can be found on an individual level, and others are deep societal problems that require collective organizing. Our work on both of these fronts is guided by a steering committee of beginning and retiring farmers.

In this introduction, we want to illustrate the importance of farm transitions, describe opportunities for beginning farmers, and detail next steps for you to consider while considering a transition.

The Need for Successful Farm Transitions

Healthy rural communities, strong farm businesses, continued land stewardship—all of these things result from successful farm transitions. These things benefit us all: the retiring farmer, the beginning farmer and the communities that surround them. With the percentage of older farmers on the rise, it is projected in the next 20 years 70 percent of ranchland and farmland will change hands (www.uvm.edu/farmlasts/projectexecutivesummary.pdf).

Without proactive planning by individuals and communities, the Midwest will lose the family farms that are the cornerstone of its economy and culture. Farmers are already seeing these alarming trends: mega-farms are gobbling up all available land and bulldozing the homestead, investors are padding their portfolios with farmland, and family farmers struggle to find available and affordable land.

These problems are deep and solving them will require equally deep structural change. At the same time, retiring farmers have an opportunity to determine the legacy of their farm by planning their farm transition and potentially providing a beginning farmer with a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start farming.

Opportunity for Beginning Farmers

Beginning farmers represent a lot of opportunity. They can operate strong businesses, care for the land and be an active part of vibrant rural communities. At a time when many small towns are experiencing a decline in population, these new communities members can contribute to schools, places of worship, and local government and organizations. In addition, good food, grown locally and sustainably by family farmers, is increasingly valued by eaters and businesses. These eaters are willing to pay organic premiums that provide a living wage for farmers, which in turn contribute to a vibrant Main Street. Established farmers and rural communities also have an opportunity. They can start TODAY by envisioning the future they desire for their farms and towns, and laying out a plan to establish that vision. What would it look like if a county supported three new farms each year? What if every farm had a transition plan in place? What is your vision for your farm, the land and your community?

Taking Action

It is never too early to determine your legacy and start planning for the future of your farm, whether you are a farmer, a landowner or someone with farmland in your family. This toolkit provides a starting point for this important process. It contains resources and links to services to help you establish a plan.

This toolkit also contains examples of successful farm transitions. It's important to share the creative and inspiring solutions farmers and landowners are using around the region. We would love to hear your farm transition story—please contact Karen Stettler (contact information below) to share!

Get Started

- Use this toolkit to start planning for the future of your farm.
- Give us feedback: let us how this toolkit helped you and what we should add.
- Tell *your* story: share your vision for your farm or transition experience with your neighbors, customers, faith community and more. If you want some help, please contact Karen Stettler (contact information below).

- **Join the Land Stewardship Project today.** A future for family farmers requires both individual and collective action. Our members throughout the Upper Midwest are organizing for a farming system that puts people and the land first—your participation matters. Join by calling Karen Stettler or visit the LSP website and click on the “Join” button.

For more information, contact:

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