



## Voices From Our Network

### Continuous Living Cover Farmers

#### - Breslin Farms -



In the face of climate and pandemic uncertainty, Molly Breslin of Breslin Farms in Ottawa, Illinois, is planting sunflowers, considering trading small grains for intensive cover cropping, and finding hope in the national canning jar shortage.

### **Molly Breslin, Breslin Farms, Ottawa, Illinois**

*Molly Breslin has 80 acres in production on a 100-acre farm in Ottawa, Illinois. The farm was started by Molly and her father, John, and is in its 11th year, on land that has been in Molly's family for generations. John was a retired lawyer when they began, but in recent years he has taught himself immigration law and come out of retirement to work on immigration cases. Molly is now sole proprietor of the certified organic farm. She grows yellow and heirloom corn; soybeans; dry beans; sunflowers; small grains including wheat, rye, and oats; and cover crops.*



*We asked Molly to reflect on farming in this uncertain time: practicing resilience and finding hope. We have condensed and edited her words for length and clarity.*

### **On-farm resilience**

On the farm, I think of resilience in terms of our ability to adapt as the climate changes. 2019 was the worst year ever, I felt like I was drowning. My 83-year-old neighbor said it was the worst year he'd ever seen too. It was cold and wet during planting and cold and wet during harvest. My cousin kept his combine in my shed until he finished harvest; I planned to do my fall clean-up once he got it out – but he didn't finish until February 15. So I never cleaned up equipment and put it away, things broke over the winter... That's what kind of year it was. So I've been thinking about ways to make this land more resilient.

One example of how this looks on the ground is that I started growing sunflowers. They don't make as much money as corn, but they can be planted in the same position in a rotation and they can be planted much later to still make a crop. They're native, and equipment doesn't require much modification to deal with them. Last year, I planted 1.5 acres because it was such a bad year and I had a piece of ground where I couldn't put in anything else. This year, I got a contract for sunflower oil and grew out 30 acres. Sunflowers can be used in an emergency as an alternate crop, or just to diversify cropping possibilities. And we'll see – when we started growing corn in 2012, organic feed corn was between \$12-14/bu. Now it's \$6.75/bu. So we're not yet in a situation where sunflowers would be more profitable than corn, but we might get there, especially if weather variability means we're planting later and the crop is already compromised.

### **Reconsidering farming goals**

After 10 years on the farm, I've been thinking a lot about my reasons for farming: is it to steward the land for the future or to maintain the farm as a business with yield and profit as the main aim? I've been balancing both over

the last decade. I have a second job now, which gives me more flexibility to think about different options. For instance, I'm considering taking a quarter to a third of my ground out of production annually and cover cropping it, as an investment in long-term soil building and tillage reduction.

I used to do a lot of direct marketing, including of small grains, which otherwise are notoriously less profitable. I lost those direct markets with the pandemic. If I don't want to keep pursuing that avenue, I could take small grains out of the cash crop rotation and replace that year with intensive cover crops. I could be improving my ground much more effectively – topsoil renewal, water infiltration, carbon sequestration – if I were focusing on cover cropping, rather than balancing cover crops and making an immediate profit. I'm exploring this idea, it's moved my thinking toward the long view of the viability of my farm.

## **Systemic economic resilience**

On a larger scale, the pandemic and resulting economic situation have really illuminated that systemic, government-led organization of and support for things like child care, health care, and education is absolutely essential to making farming possible. If we want more people – and especially more women – in farming, which is essentially a risky gamble of an industry, we need to address some of the huge barriers to entry and ensure farmer stability.

Someone recently called and offered me another 100-acre farm. I had sit down and think about it: I have a four-year-old, no childcare due to the pandemic, and a side job. I would like to, but I'm just not sure I can take on any more. We shouldn't have to take out enormous personal loans to start a business. Wealth gaps created and exacerbated by decades of structural discrimination mean that many people can't get in at all. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for people doing all kinds of work. Without that, as a nation, we are less resilient in the face of any kind of crisis.

## **Finding hope**

When last season was so bad, there was a lot of cover cropping on prevent-plant acreage. I found that really hopeful. Now that these people have grown a cover crop, maybe they'll see the benefit and do it again.

I find hope in the common ground I've seen out here on climate change. Farmers might not all agree that it's human-caused, but it's so obvious that it's happening and that we need to adapt. I've had conversations with conventional farmers about how we're going to change what we're doing. I'm seeing farmers interested in more possibilities besides just switching their variety of corn.

The pandemic-based fear of food insecurity has created a canning jar shortage – that gives me hope. People are taking their food supply seriously and taking matters into their own hands on a major scale.

And every year, the spring gives me hope.

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