



Green Lands
Blue Waters

Executive Summary Integrating Conservation into Farmland Transfers

Possibilities, Problems and Opportunities for Research and Collaboration

Background

A massive amount of farmland in the Upper Midwest will transfer ownership in the next decade. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a report on land tenure, ownership and transition, estimating that 10 percent of all farmland (91.5 million acres) was expected to change hands between 2015 and 2019.

Green Lands Blue Waters, with support from the Walton Family Foundation and in partnership with Renewing the Countryside, convened a group of 30 research and non-profit leaders virtually in the summer of 2020 to explore how this generational transfer of farmland could be an opportunity to increase conservation practices in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. A brief review is provided in this executive summary. The full report documents the highlights of the conversations and the themes that arose. While it is in no way an exhaustive resource on these topics, it represents a robust discussion amongst partners with deep expertise on the topics and a commitment to moving this work forward.

Introductory Research Overview

Mitch Hunter, Research Director at American Farmland Trust, and Kathy Ruhf, Senior Advisor at Land For Good, set the stage for the convening by providing overviews of concepts and research impacting farmland.

Mitch shared findings from the “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States” report that breaks down, by state, the conversion of 11 million acres of farmland and ranchland to non-production uses between 2001 and 2016. An interactive website complements the report and includes an array of information and tools including spatial mapping of land cover and conversion, analysis of state policy responses to conversion, and a call to action.

Kathy provided an overview of farm transfer and succession. She shared that 90% of farmers do not have an exit strategy and spoke about the challenges inherent in developing succession and transfer plans, including: emotional stress, economics, family communications, cost of transfer, and lack of legal resources. She also noted that a large percentage of farmland is held by non-operating owners. To improve outcomes, efforts are growing among farm advocates and advisors to develop skills and capacity to assist in these transitions.

Models from the Field

Emy Brawley of The Conservation Fund gave an overview of farmland easements. She then shared examples from Michigan, Wisconsin and Georgia where they have been employed in ways that have led to combining conservation with farmland transfer to new farmers.

David Miller from Iroquois Valley Farms (IVF) shared their model of helping farmers access land - either through a purchase and lease arrangement or by providing loans. Working with non-traditional investors willing to provide capital over a long timeframe and at low rates of return, IVF puts the farmer first, and now offers additional operating loans to implement conservation practices. Rock Green Farms, located in Will County, Illinois, is a successful example in action where conservation and farm transfer were combined.

Julie Ristau of Main Street Project shared about the Agrarian Commons - a model grounded in community involvement, racial equity, conservation, economic health, and community benefits. Main Street Project, in Northfield, MN, is one of ten newly formed Agrarian Commons entities across the country. Each is a 501c2 that is held under the Agrarian Trust, a 501c3.

Summary of Discussions, Breakouts, and Survey Input from Participants

Leverage and Incentives

Incentives can be successful and sometimes necessary tools to motivate farmers to make significant changes. This holds true for farm succession and farm land transfers, especially if the desire is to increase conservation and provide pathways for emerging farmers to access and steward land. Opportunities for incentives/leverage arose in the policy arena, with farmland easements, and through innovative financing and ownership.

- **Local, State and Federal Policies**

Filling gaps in policies and policy mechanisms at the local, state and federal levels could lead to improved farmland transfer and access outcomes, including integrating conservation.

- **Farmland Easements**

Agriculture and conservation easements are critical, but infrequent in the Midwest. Structured appropriately, farmland easements that include conservation can play an important role in equitable land transfer that also can lead to improved land stewardship.

- **Innovative Financing & Ownership**

Both time-tested and new models of financing and ownership can offer opportunities for farmland transfers that incorporate conservation, are farmer-focused, and include wealth sharing.

Support/Facilitation Ecosystem

In order to have a system where farmland transfers build equity and prosperity for emerging farmers while also integrating conservation, an ecosystem of service providers and allies needs to be available to support and facilitate these transfers. Members of that ecosystem and their roles include:

- **Direct Technical Assistance Providers**

Knowledge and capacity to provide assistance to exiting farmers and farmland owners as well as to new farmers is critical.

- **Professionals who Advise Farmers and Landowners**

Farmers and farmland owners rely on a variety of advisors and service providers who could potentially be allies in this work.

- **General Public**

While on-the-ground decisions are primarily made by the farmland owners, and while trusted advisors and service providers can provide information and support, there is also a role for the general public in shifting the dynamics.

Farmland Owners – Finding Them, Understanding Them, and Research Gaps

Any plan of blending farmland transfer and conservation ultimately involves the owners of the land. A number of research questions and potential strategies for engaging and influencing farmland owners emerged from the discussions.

There are important differences in farmland owners. While 60 percent of farmland owners also farm themselves, 40 percent do not – and may live far from the land they own. Another distinction is size and location. Concerns and opportunities differ greatly for small, direct market farms near urban areas compared to large commodity farms in remote areas compared to Agriculture of the Middle farms.

Research gaps include how to find and engage farmland owners, exploring their plans for their land, understanding their values, what motivates them, where they turn for advice. These gaps could be filled by asking USDA to collect additional or different data in their national surveys, developing new research initiatives, and updating and Expanding the FarmLASTS (Farm Land Access, Succession, Tenure and Stewardship) research that was completed in 2012.

Next Generation Farmers and Farmland Owners - An eye toward equity, justice, and reparations

Engaging the next generation of all farmland owners is essential, but during these convenings there was interest among participants to discuss issues related to equity and justice in farmland ownership and explore research questions and strategies that could move forward an agenda where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) would have equitable access to land, and in the cases where land was stolen from them, have land returned.

Information was shared on how little land BIPOC farmers own. Stories were shared of BIPOC farmers facing structural racism when seeking access to federal programs for farmers. Suggestions were made to include more BIPOC representatives in discussions like this, to take action that would change practices and culture within agencies, and to expand efforts that leverage the point of farm transition, through incentives or owner goodwill, as an opportunity to get more farmland into BIPOC ownership

Structural Barriers and Recommendations

Structural barriers have a broad impact on the goal of combining farm transfer and conservation. While time at these convenings did not allow for a robust discussion of these barriers, identifying them and thinking creatively about them might suggest opportunities or lead to the creation of programs. Structural barriers that were identified in the conversation include ownership of farmland by those outside of the community, vast consolidation of farmland, and the way agriculture is monetized.

Recommendations

In each section of this report there are numerous recommendations for both research and practice. Within the group convened, areas that rose to the top included:

- 1. Incentivize land transfer that includes conservation.**
- 2. Increase knowledge and availability of professional technical assistance.**
- 3. Better understand and engage landowners.**
- 4. Integrate equity and justice.**
- 5. Increase collaborative research as well as research/practitioner connections.**

The meeting ended with a clear interest in staying connected and coming back together in smaller groups for deeper discussions and working meetings to develop collaborative research projects.



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