

Farming on Conserved Land:

Stories from Landowners and Farmers



Case Studies of Successful Farming Arrangements

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The Monadnock Conservancy, founded in 1989, is the only land trust dedicated exclusively to the 35 towns in the Monadnock region of southwestern New Hampshire. Its mission is to work with communities and landowners to conserve the natural resources, wild and working lands, rural character and scenic beauty of the region. Based in Keene, N.H., the Conservancy is an accredited organization that has protected over 19,000 acres of forest, farmland, shoreline, wetlands, wildlife habitat and recreation trails in the region. www.monadnockconservancy.org

Cheshire County Conservation District

CCCD has a mission to promote the conservation and responsible use of natural and agricultural resources for the people of Cheshire County by bringing individuals and groups with common environmental interests together to share ideas, resources and information. The Conservation District places a priority on providing public outreach and education to the community focusing on environmental concerns in a manner that encourages appreciation and stewardship of natural assets for the benefit of future generations. www.CheshireConservation.org

Land For Good

Land For Good specializes in farmland access, tenure and transfer. With a NH field agent and expert support staff, LFG helps farmers find and get onto land, and farmland owners to make land available for farming. For twelve years, LFG has provided farm succession planning education and assistance to farm families, often coordinating a team of advisors. www.LandForGood.org

University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension

UNH Cooperative Extension brings information and education into the communities of the Granite State to help make NH's individuals, business, and communities more successful and its natural resources healthy and productive. Focus areas include food and agriculture, community and economic development, natural resources, and 4-H Youth and Families. www.extension.unh.edu

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Interviewees

Larry and Josie Britton
Sharman Howe and Ed Moura
Terry and Hugh Landis
Tory McCagg and Carl Querfurth
Juliana Stevens
Craig Thompson and Sarah Heffron

Focus Group Participants

Charles and Mary Butterfield
Will Fenno
Lincoln Geiger
Holly Gowdy
Todd Horner
Sharman Howe
Shelley Goguen Hulbert
Monica and Michael Lehner
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Emily Hague, Stacy Gambrel, Emily Hague, Stacy Gambrel and Bill Sumner

Executive Summary

In 2014, the Cheshire County Conservation District — in partnership with the Monadnock Conservancy, Land For Good and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension — was awarded a two-year grant for the Conserved Farmland Access Partnership project through the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program to study farmland access issues in Cheshire County, N.H. The project recognized that access to sufficient farmland is a significant challenge for farmers and sought to identify the barriers and opportunities to getting more land into agriculture. In particular, the project looked at conserved land — and whether this might provide an opportunity for farmers looking for land. The project team felt that owners of conserved land might be more amenable to farming since they had already demonstrated a strong land ethic by conserving their property. The Monadnock Conservancy holds 45 easements on land with agricultural potential, yet less than a quarter of this land is used for farming by the owner or a tenant. The project team felt that there may be untapped potential with this land and wanted to explore whether more of it could be brought back into production.

To research this issue, the team surveyed landowners and farmers, conducted focus group sessions and offered farmer-landowner mixers where each group could meet and greet and get technical assistance. While there is still much to be learned about this complex issue, the research led to the following findings:

- ◆ Participating landowners have a strong conservation ethic and want to see their land farmed. In cases where the land was already being farmed, landowners wanted to see that use expanded and increased.
- ◆ There can be a disconnect between a landowner’s interest in seeing the land farmed and the realities of a working farm (the dirt, smells and unpredictability inherent in farming). Defining expectations from both parties and establishing good communication early is key.
- ◆ Economics were not a major consideration for most landowners. Most understood that farming has slim margins and making money from a lease is usually not realistic.
- ◆ Farmers desired longer-term, more secure arrangements (which would give them the confidence to invest in the land). Some landowners wished for this as well, but others did not want to “tie up their land.”
- ◆ Both landowners and farmers agreed that the conservation easement did not inhibit farming.
- ◆ Both landowners and farmers wanted more opportunities to connect with each other and desired technical assistance (such as help drafting leases).
- ◆ The biggest challenge for both groups seemed to be how to connect with one another. Many arrangements seem to happen through word of mouth. There was a desire for a local land-linking program to help bring the two groups together more easily.

These issues are explored in the case studies provided in this guide, which highlight three successful farming arrangements on Monadnock Conservancy conserved land. The complete results and a discussion of these findings are available in a project report at the Cheshire County Conservation District: www.cheshireconservation.org. For more information, the members of the project team may also be contacted (see next page).

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Ernie Vose on his farm in Walpole, N.H.

Whippoorwill Farm, Marlborough

Farmers: Craig Thompson and Sarah Heffron (Mayfair Farm)

Landowners: David and Mary Howe, but land managed by daughter Sharman Howe and her husband, Ed Moura

The Land: Whippoorwill Farm consists of 400 acres of fields and forest in Marlborough, N.H., that support an active sugar maple and livestock operation.

The Howe family has a long-standing relationship with their land. Sharman Howe's grandparents bought Whippoorwill Farm over 100 years ago, and throughout that time nurtured this land to support sheep, maple syrup and, most recently, pigs. Sharman's parents, David and Mary, protected the land with a conservation easement through the Monadnock Conservancy in 2007. When David and Mary recently moved into an assisted living facility, the time came to start thinking about a different way to run the farm. (Incidentally, their move coincided with the retirement of their long-time caretaker/farm manager.) Sharman and her husband, Ed Moura, had clear goals in mind for the property: sustainability of the farm operation, maintaining the good quality-of-life the farm provides and excellent stewardship of the land. They began the process of looking for a new farmer for the property by simply putting feelers out into the community. After a year-and-a-half search, they connected with nearby farmers Craig Thompson and Sarah Heffron of Mayfair Farm who were looking to expand their diversified operation. Sharman shared that it came down to two simple, but important factors — experience and proximity — both of which Craig and Sarah had.

HELPFUL HINTS

The search for a farmer takes time! Don't expect to find the right match within a month or two.

Word-of-mouth works. Tell everyone you know what you are looking for and be willing to talk to a variety of prospective farmers.

Give up the need to micromanage. If you are trying to manage the day-to-day activities, you should just hire a farm manager.



Sharman Howe and one of Mayfair Farm's cows.

They spent the next year crafting a revolving 5-year lease agreement, which spells out use of the land, who is responsible for repairs/upkeep and payment terms.

The parties annually review the terms and discuss any changes. In developing the lease, Sharman felt it helpful to consider a list of questions provided in the Land For Good guide, "Landowner's Guide to Leasing to a Farmer" (see Resources, page 11). Sharman also credits Ian McSweeney at the Russell Forest and Conservation Foundation, which provides technical assistance to landowners and farmers, for his guidance in developing the lease.

Ultimately, according to Ed, this match works because "their needs meet ours and vice versa." Craig and Sarah couldn't agree more. They were looking for additional land closer to their home farm, after years of traveling long distances to hay small fields spread out across the region.

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Most of the properties did not have reliable access to water or fencing, or needed serious work to be viable farmland. So when the opportunity with Whippoorwill presented itself — in the form of an email out-of-the-blue from Sharman — Craig and Sarah were delighted.

Whippoorwill Farm sits just 12 minutes from Craig and Sarah's home farm, Mayfair Farm. This was definitely a huge selling point, as well as having access to functional equipment and infrastructure, and the opportunity to take over a turnkey sugar maple operation. (Since sugaring is new to them, they were trained by the retiring farm manager who was willing to stay on during this transition.)

According to Craig and Sarah there are many benefits to leasing versus buying. For one, it allows a farmer to scale back their operation if need be — when their business model changes or the workload becomes too much. While they still continue to farm some land on just hand-shake agreements, Craig and Sarah agree that having a 5-year rolling lease on Whippoorwill was essential given the investment they were making in the land. Having a long-term lease is also required to qualify for certain grants and loans.

HELPFUL HINTS

Think about what the land can do for you, not what you can do for the land.

Don't underestimate the importance of proximity and the availability of equipment and infrastructure.

It is helpful to find landowners who are realistic about the economic realities of farming (very slim margins).



Kate Prefakes Photography

Craig Thompson, Sarah Heffron and their children.

When asked what advice they would give to farmers looking to lease land, Craig suggested farmers take a “Wendell Berry type of approach ... and wait and let the land tell you what to do. Rather than walking in with a checklist of what the land needs to do for you, let the farm make that checklist for you.”

He added that Whippoorwill Farm is the perfect example of this. It had been set up for lamb, hay and sugaring — and is this exactly what they are continuing to use it for today.

Darwin's View, Jaffrey

Farmers: Hugh and Terry Landis

Landowners: Carl Querfurth and Tory McCagg

The Land: 194 acres of forest and fields in Jaffrey, N.H.

When Carl Querfurth and Tory McCagg bought their 194-acre property in Jaffrey in 2006, conserving the land — and seeing it farmed — were top priorities. The previous owners had just mowed the field every year, and Carl and Tory wanted to see the land doing something more. When Hugh and Terry Landis approached them with an interest in growing vegetables for their 14-member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, it seemed like the ideal arrangement. Both couples are committed to organic and biodynamic farming practices. As Tory explained, “It’s important that what we do here supports the land, rather than taking from it — to heal it.”

The first season that Hugh and Terry farmed the land, there was an written lease in place, which they renewed for a second year. While both parties recognize the advantages and safeguards that a lease provides, they ultimately chose to continue without a

lease in the third year. As Carl put it, “so much of this process was about having like-mindedness and the same philosophy... we didn’t want too much red tape that would stymie farming on the property.”

Carl stated that initially it was helpful to go through the lease process, as it got them all thinking about the right questions to ask and to make sure that both parties’ vision for the land aligned. Tory added that, for them, ensuring good stewardship was the number one concern, and that they simply “do not have a profit motive in any of this.” Carl and Tory cautioned landowners to not focus on the need to make money off their land and to instead consider the service that the farmer is providing.

When asked what advice they would give to other landowners and farmers, Hugh Landis said, “Be open-minded, talk, communicate ... unknowns can turn one or the other party off.” Tory and Carl agreed, and added that for them, they really were thinking about the broader community benefits the farm could provide — much in the same way that donating a conservation easement provided a public benefit.



Stacy Gambrel

From left to right: Hugh Landis, Terry Landis, Carl Querfurth and Tory McCagg.

HELPFUL HINTS

Be open-minded and don't be afraid to think big!

Constantly talk about what is working, what isn't, and where you both see the direction of the farm going.

Owners should think beyond economic benefits of leasing land since in many cases there will be little, if any, financial gain from the arrangement.

Britton Dairy Farm and Stevens Family, Walpole

Farmers: Larry and Josie Britton

Landowners: The Stevens family

The Land: 110 acres of land in Walpole, N.H., half of which is hay fields and pasture used by the Brittons to support their dairy farm.

Dairy farmer Larry Britton has a ready answer for when the Britton Family and the Stevens Family began their partnership on Watkins Hill in Walpole, N.H. It was 1948, and the night that Larry's Uncle Warren, then just a boy, fell and hit his head on the washtub and was rushed up the hill to see Doc Stevens. It was an unconventional start to a farming relationship, but Britton family has farmed on Stevens land ever since. (Warren, by the way, was just fine.)

Generations of the Stevens family have lived on and farmed the western slope of Watkins Hill, and the land was particularly dear to John Stevens, Doc Stevens's son. In 2006, John and his wife, Peg, donated to the Monadnock Conservancy conservation easements on the Walpole land and on Peg's family's land in nearby Alstead. Though John and Peg have since died, their six adult children carry on the lease tradition with Larry and Josie Britton, who themselves recently took over ownership of the Britton Farm from Larry's parents.



Larry Britton

Larry and Josie use the Stevens family land to grow hay in support of their herd of Holsteins down the road, and to pasture heifers, dry cows and a few horses. They make an annual lease payment to the Stevenses, plus provide some brush-hogging services and the occasional load of manure for the family's gardens. Because of the many years of trust between them the families do not currently have a formal written agreement, but Larry Britton and Juliana Stevens agree that it would be a good idea. When the conservation easement was placed on the property in 2006, there was no need for Larry to change his practices, as he was already in compliance with the easement's basic farming provisions. In fact, Juliana believes conservation easements could be a draw to farmers who can be assured they won't be displaced by conversion to non-farming uses or development.

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Juliana Stevens

Peg Stevens at the farm.

Britton Dairy Farm and Stevens Family, Walpole

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Like many New England dairy farmers, Larry depends on a mix of his own land and fields owned by others. Farming land you don't control can be stressful, but Larry maintains a positive attitude: "You never know what you'll lose next, which is why we keep all options open. When one door closes, another usually opens."

Larry's advice to other farmers in his situation is simple: Do what you say you're going to do, and remain flexible enough to roll with the inevitable changes. He tells an entertaining story to illustrate the challenges of farming on someone else's property. Years ago, Larry sent a young farmhand to spread a tractor load of manure on a field they had permission to farm. As the young man began his work, the property owner emerged from the house, signaling for the fragrant spreading to stop. "Could you please do that a different day?" he asked. "I'm serving brunch right now." The experience reinforced the need for landowners to understand that manure has an odor and farmers can't easily change their schedules, yet farmers need to understand that landowners ultimately hold control.

Juliana speaks for her entire family in expressing delight with the arrangement with the Brittons. "We grew up enjoying the cows and horses in the fields, and this allows them to remain," she said. As former

HELPFUL HINTS

Keep an open dialogue, especially in the beginning of the relationship.

Understand the realities of farming — it's dirty, smelly and unpredictable!

Farmers should remain true to their word and be ready to be flexible.



farmers themselves, the Stevens family understands the need to remain flexible to the unpredictable challenges faced by farmers. Communications are paramount. Juliana recommends open dialogue at all times, especially early in the relationship. She advises all parties to "know and discuss the parameters of what you want and don't want to avoid frustrations down the road."

For Juliana and her siblings, leasing their land to Larry and Josie is a win-win. "The fields would disappear to scrub if not for the cows," said Juliana, who is also glad to help a neighbor and farm family. "We wish we had more land for them and others. If we don't protect farmers, we're all going to lose."

Resources

FOR LANDOWNERS

Landowner's Guide to Leasing Land for Farming. Land For Good. landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Landowners-Guide-To-Leasing-To-A-Farmer-Handbook.pdf

Landowner's Guide to Sustainable Farm Leasing. Drake University Agricultural Law Center. sustainablefarmlease.org/the-landowners-guide-to-sustainable-farm-leases/

Leasing Land to Farmers: An Overview. University of Vermont Cooperative Extension. www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/LeasingLandtoFarmers.html

FOR FARMERS

A Farmer's Guide to Working with Land Trusts. www.youngfarmers.org/farmerlandtrustguide/

Farmland Tenure and Leasing (by attorney Annette Higby). landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/Farmland-Tenure-And-Leasing-Legal-Guide-ChapterIII.pdf

FOR BOTH LANDOWNERS AND FARMERS

Equity Trust. equitytrust.org

New England Farmland Finder. newenglandfarmlandfinder.org/

Russell Farm and Forest Conservation Foundation. (Ian McSweeney, Executive Director). russellfound.org/

Toolbox for Leasing Farmland. landforgood.org/resources/toolbox/leasing/