

Tracking progress in farm link, farm transfer, and farm succession programming

Project team

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The data and approach

We surveyed and interviewed the leaders of active and ended farm link services in the 12 states of the US North Central Region (NCR) (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD and WI). Of the 42 program leaders we contacted in 2017, 30 participated in the study, 80% representing active programs and 20% closed programs. Based on survey responses, these programs serve a total of 6,300 owners and seekers. The programs have a median of 10 years' experience. Most of the programs assessed are located within NGO's (63%), with most others within an extension program at a land grant university (17%) or a state department of agriculture (10%).

FARM LINK SERVICES: RECOMMENDATIONS OF PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

The objective of this work is to assist farm link services in their efforts to facilitate farm/ranch transfers between non-relatives. Farm/ranch transfers between unrelated parties are increasingly common. The majority of agricultural land is actually acquired from a non-relative, and 25% of transfers of farmland ownership are between non-relatives. In response, farm linking services, along with financial incentives, public policies, and other targeted programming, aim to support transfers of operations and/or land between unrelated farm/ranch owners and farm/ranch seekers. One of the challenges these programs face is in identifying outcome metrics to demonstrate success.

- Many farm/ranch transfers take several years to complete; they are hard to track. Within this long-term horizon, medium-term outcomes can clarify progress.
- Given the complexity of the transfer process, service providers recommend tracking medium-term outcomes among farm/ranch seekers only, and not owners, to simplify monitoring. The metrics in the table are used in various combinations by farm link services to track expected, reasonable outcomes. These items reflect self-reporting by seekers, but could be measured otherwise.
- Metrics in the table also serve as markers of land access and beginning farmer/rancher success more generally.

Menu of recommended medium-term metrics	
Markers of progress in farm/ranch linking	General markers of beginning farmer / rancher land access, persistence, or success
% of farm/ranch seekers who:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have paired with an unrelated owner • Have acquired ground (rental/ownership) from an unrelated owner • Are employed on someone else's farm/ranch • Have developed a new enterprise on an existing farm/ranch • Are renting/leasing assets from an unrelated owner • Are sharing crops, livestock, equipment, etc. with an unrelated owner • Are purchasing assets from an unrelated owner • Have developed a new farm/ranch • Are in ownership positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are farming • Are farming as their main profession • Say their operation is more stable • Say their operation has grown • Say they are likely to acquire ground • Are still farming the same ground as when last assessed



- Service providers express more satisfaction with the effects of their work and return on investment when they track medium-term outcome metrics.
- Service providers noted the need for additional funding for effective monitoring and evaluation. Some programs conduct monitoring despite a modest budget.
- The most systematic monitoring method is to survey seeker participants every few years. Some programs ask how their seeker-participants are faring through an annual newsletter or regular gathering.

Key takeaways

Based on our findings, we urge leaders of farm link services to institute a system for regularly monitoring medium-term outcomes, at least every few years. We urge funders and policymakers to require this and to fund outcome monitoring activities. A recent assessment of the US Department of Agriculture Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (USDA BFRDP) made the same recommendation, as do two other assessments of farm link services.

This menu of medium-term outcomes fills a previous gap in knowledge, providing more clarity about expected, reasonable outcomes of farm linking programs.

Data source

Valliant, J. C. D., Ruhf, K. Z., Gibson, K. D., Brooks, J. R., & Farmer, J. R. (2019). Fostering farm transfers from farm owners to unrelated, new farmers: A qualitative assessment of farm link services. *Land Use Policy*, 86, 438-447. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2019.05.004>

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