



FARM TRANSITIONS FOR SECURE AND MEANINGFUL LEGACIES

BY JULIA VALLIANT

It is normal for farm owners to dream of passing their farm along in a way that is both secure for their finances and personally *meaningful* for them. Regardless of how one approaches a farm transition, it is always a tender process. That has to do with many things, one of them being something Mary Swander, a writer on farm transfer, observed: "Good Midwesterners don't talk about anything that has money and death attached to it." She recalls an old farmer telling her, "It is a lot easier to talk about sex with your offspring than it is farmland transfer."

Transferring a farm from one generation to the next is not easy, whether or not a farm has a known successor in the family. Hearing from other farmers who are in the midst of farm transitions and aiming to satisfy whatever matters most for them, can help make your process easier. They're making it work. They're doing it. And you can too.

For example, Stollers Organic Dairy in Sterling, Ohio is currently undertaking a proactive and intentional approach to planning for within-family succession in order to preserve the legacy of the family farm.

Farmers that don't have a family successor can turn their circumstances into gold when they create an opportunity for an unrelated new farmer by transferring some or all of the farm to them. One such farm owner says, "For us it's important to give a beginning farmer a chance, and not just make a big farmer bigger. It's really a joy to help someone get started." Farm owners like this one are figuring out how to avoid selling at auction and consolidating into a neighbor's growing operation, by instead finding a way to continue their business as an entity, or ensure a certain future for their land, or grow their community by making a livelihood for another family. Stories of farm transitions between non-family members were recorded this year by the national oral history project StoryCorps. (You may know StoryCorps from hearing their radio stories every Friday morning on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*.)

Stories like theirs, where farm seekers find an opportunity by transferring into a farm entity that would otherwise probably liquidate, are important to share with farm owners across the country. Right now, America has many well-prepared aspiring farmers looking for a farm. One estimate by The Ohio State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture places the number of new farms per year across the country at 70,000. This is the same number of farms as in all of Wisconsin—that's a lot of farms! Many new farmers come from a childhood farm but need to strike out on their own because the home farm cannot accommodate them. No matter their background, the majority of new farmers will not inherit land. So, by all accounts, the most widespread difficulty new farmers face is accessing farm ground. Also difficult to access are affordable on-farm housing as well as capital, financing, and credit. Every survey of aspiring and new

farmers reports that secure land tenure is the biggest obstacle. "Tenure" includes long-term lease, ideally with equity-building, as well as ownership.

The moment of intergenerational farm transfer presents an opportunity for new farmers to enter into farming. Farm owners throughout the Midwest are working out plans for family succession, and other farmers who lack a family successor have explored their personal networks and beyond to work toward a handoff to someone from a different family. These stories of farm families who are managing to align their values with their pocketbooks to create a plan for carrying their farm on into the future can be inspiring and informative for those following in their footsteps.

Julia Valliant is a researcher at Indiana University Bloomington. She collected stories through a North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program project about farms transitioning to non-heir beginning farmers. She can be reached at jdv@indiana.edu.



Editor's Note: To hear stories of farmland transition that can help spring-board a discussion about how you imagine your farm transitioning, join Julia and Scott Stoller for a 90-minute OEFFA conference workshop, "Farm Transitions for Secure and Meaningful Legacies" on February 15. You're also invited to a free Farm Land and Labor Mixer on February 14, where farmers looking for land can connect with farmers and landowners with land for sale or lease or who are looking for a successor. For more information, see pg. 3 or go to www.oeffa.org/conference2019.

ADVANCING FARMLAND ACCESS AND TRANSFER IN THE OHIO STATEHOUSE

There are solutions and resources we can make available for landowners to ensure their properties are protected and can be farmed sustainably for years to come, while also helping to set up beginning farmers for success with access to the land and resources they need. OEFFA will be advancing the Family Farm ReGeneration Act in the Ohio legislature in 2019. The bill will provide a tax break for landowners that transition their land to a beginning farmer through sale or lease and is similar to a law passed in Minnesota in 2017.

A 2017 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition found access to land is the top challenge beginning farmers face. We can do better to plan for a future of farming. Show your support for beginning farmers by signing a petition in support of this legislation today. Go to www.oeffa.org/q/FFRGA.