

“Kind of Like eFarmony:” A Study of Land Link Programs in the Northeast U.S.

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Research Problem

- The aging U.S. farmer population is a concern as substantial farmland transfers become pending^{1,2}; Young and beginning farmers face barriers to land access³, despite renewed interest in farming⁴
- Land link programs “match” farmers to farmland owners, but little is known about how the programs achieve these ends or whether they effectively improve secure land access

Research Questions

- How do land link program staff describe the characteristics and farm mental models of seekers and owners in their programs?
- How do land link programs facilitate shared mental models for successful matches between farmland seekers and owners?

Conceptual Framework

Mental models

- Mental representation of organized knowledge about substantive domain; background, goals and experience contribute to model formation; expectations, decisions and actions are filtered through it⁵
- Mental model accuracy and sharedness are important to successful partnerships⁶

Agricultural ladder

- Potential representation of farmers’ mental model of ideal land access, with ownership historically seen as the top “rung;” uncertain if this is true today⁷

Research Methodology

- The Northeast U.S. was chosen for high geographic concentration of programs (19 of 48 total) and relatively similar agricultural heritage and policies
- Semi-structured phone interviews lasting 1-2 hours with 16 key informant staff members (representing 17 programs) out of 19 total programs in the Northeast U.S. were conducted between 11/2012 and 2/2013
- Transcripts were coded using open source software RQDA and themes were developed



Findings from Key Informant Land Link Staff Interviews

Farmland Seeker Characteristics

The majority are:

- Beginning farmers
- First-generation farmers
- Relatively limited-resource

Seeker Goals and Motives

- Vegetables or diversified products
- Direct markets
- Sustainable production methods

“They want to provide that lifestyle to their children, that type of growing up... People want to get back to the basics, they want to get back to the land, back to owning something, seeing their kids every day, having animals and learning how to grow plants, and a lot of it’s about that. It’s a personal preference, definitely.”

Seeker Mental Models

Of farming: Level of experience in farming is insufficient: “There are a lot of farm seekers who have no experience in agriculture and have a dream to get into agriculture. I have a concern that that entire population would fail within the first 5 years.”

Of owners: Often believe owners are “clueless” about farming, uncommitted or unclear about their goals, and want to “cash in” on their property

Of land access: Ownership is the ideal for many, but leases are most common through land link: “The majority of them imagine owning a farm at some point, but not all of them.”

Farmland Owner Characteristics

The majority are:

- Non-farmers who live on their property
- Offering their land through a lease
- Relatively well-off

Owner Goals and Motives

- Often have specific products in mind for their property despite no farm experience
- Sustainable production methods

“I originally thought that they would do it primarily for the agricultural assessment, the reduction in property taxes. But primarily they don’t. They almost all of them really want to be part of the local food movement, and they really want their property to be used for food production.”

Owner Mental Models

Of farming: Non-farming land owners don’t understand what farming involves: “If they think farming is just hay, and not black plastic, tractors every day, employees and all that stuff, then it doesn’t work.”

Of seekers: Frequently think seekers need more experience before managing land on their own

Of land access: Often unsure or unclear about how long of a commitment they are able or willing to make to lease their land to a farmer: “The land owners are just unsure what they want to take on.”

Land Link Programs and Staff People

- Land link programs make few matches—generally only 1-7 matches per year; most often leases
- Almost all programs focus resources primarily on listing land opportunities on their websites
- Staff emphasize the importance of building mental model accuracy and similarity for successful matches, but also that limited time and funding restrict their capacity to facilitate this

“The key to a good match is each partner being very, very clear about what they want, and then communicating that effectively.”

Programs can facilitate accurate and shared mental models through:

Model Screening Work

Vet applicants for experience & land suitable for agriculture
 Vet potential matches

Model Strengthening Work

Extensive application form
 Follow-up phone call
 Workshops

Model Sharing Work

Personal advising
 Business plan development
 Kitchen table consultation

Conclusions

- Few land link matches are land transfers from exiting farmers; rather, most matches are leases with non-farming land owners, who know very little about farming
- Both seekers’ and owners’ inexperience in farming make it challenging for them to assess risk or establish expectations in a potential match
- More programmatic focus on farm mental model strengthening and sharing is needed to facilitate more and better matches; programs that provide this to the growing class of non-farming land owners may support more secure land access opportunities for beginning farmers in the Northeast



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