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FARMS FOREVER

KEEPING LOCAL FARMS FARMING

by Katie Cavanagh

Massachusetts farms are small businesses that make a major contribution to our state's economy and quality of life. According to the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture (2007), the five Southeastern Massachusetts counties served by SEMAP are home to 2,160 farms stewarding over 102,500 acres of farmland and generating nearly \$140 million in agricultural production. Statewide, 80 percent of Massachusetts's farms are family-owned, and over 93 percent fit the category of "small farms," according to the USDA definition of sales below \$250,000.

Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP) is a regional nonprofit formed in 1998 whose mission is to help agricultural enterprises in Southeastern Massachusetts (Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, Nantucket and Dukes Counties) achieve economic success. We work towards this mission through two program areas, Market Development and Technical/Business Assistance. In 2006 SEMAP began a local program geared towards helping new and second generation producers begin farming in our region through increased farmland transfer and tenure arrangements. The *Farms Forever* program focuses on the long-term future of our local agricultural lands. Whether a transfer plan keeps a farm in the family, passes the farm to a new operator or combines both aspects, the focus is always kept on the future of farms. *Farms Forever* is also helping new farmers find land to work—as either a landowner or tenant—and *Farms Forever* is assisting landowners who want to find ways for their acreage to be in more active farming. *Farms Forever* wants to help area farmers find the solution that fits their personal circumstances.

The agricultural community in Southeastern Massachusetts is losing critical mass. Land valued at \$12,202/acre for agricultural use sells for up to \$175,000/acre to developers, giving an average regional farm (60 acres) a market value of \$10.5 million. Our region lost 6,718 acres of farmland from 2002-2007. These losses have already caused pieces of critical farm infrastructure (equipment dealers, repair shops, meat processing facilities) to completely shut down. While infrastructure loss is a problem in its own right, the root issue is the loss of farms. The agricultural business community will erode unless we enable more new and next-generation producers to farm in our region through expanded farm transfer/tenure options.

Small farms account for 91 percent of all U.S. farms and more than half of the land in farms. A troublesome fact about farms in the United States is that there is a disconnect between farming and the youth of America. The average age of U.S. farm operators increased from 55.3 in 2002 to 57.1 in 2007. The number of operators 75 years and older grew by 20 percent from 2002, while the number of operators under 25 years of age decreased 30 percent. As many farm families are discovering, it's no simple matter to pass their land and operation to the next operator—whether they are from inside or outside the family. What is the best way for the parents to transfer the farm assets to their child who works with them? What would be fair for the non-farming heirs? How could the transfer place as little financial burden as possible on the next generation? Most importantly, where do you start? Struggling with transfer issues can be overwhelming, and very easily placed on a back burner to deal with at a later date.

Through SEMAP's *Farms Forever* program we have assisted and continue to assist with the following farm issues:

Farmer A is thinking about the future of the farm and unsure how his family feels about the farm. He would like the farm to continue but is worried about the needs of his children and grandchildren. He would like to get general information about options and discuss what he might need to do first.

Farmer B is looking to start a farm in Southeastern Massachusetts. Having

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worked for years on others' farms in many capacities, she is aware of the challenges. Unfortunately, the land values have priced her out of being able to buy and sustain a working farm.

Landowner C is part owner of a family estate looking to lease land to a farmer. He needs help in identifying what kind of agricultural enterprise would be a right fit for the land and family. *Farms Forever* would provide a referral to a service provider that could help with a lease, and then a farmer search would be conducted.

Every situation is different and comes with its own challenges. None are solved overnight, and through my experience can take years to work out all the twists and turns. Events happen in life that take precedent over planning for your farm's future. When you have to pause, starting back up is challenging.

Transfer planning is key to keeping agricultural land in farming and out of house lots. It is also the only way you can pass a property to the next generation and ensure that your wish of keeping the farm is protected. Family relationships get complicated. Especially with the addition of future generations, the people with an interest in the farm multiply, making it impossible to make it "fair" for everyone involved. The old way of doing things (whoever wants to keep farming can) is gone because there is a much more profitable solution for everyone. The situation now is fighting to keep the land and trying to farm it at the same time. The pressure that a current farmer must endure is less about the seasons and more about the money. All too often I hear farming is a thing of the past and sometimes for a family that is true. In the past, farming was not only an occupation but also a way of life. The difference is that there are people out there that would like the opportunity to live that life. A farm has to be looked at as more than something you own, but as a member of the family that deserves to have a life of its own for generations to come.

For more information about *Farms Forever*, call 774-240-7004, email Kcavanagh@semaponline.org or visit www.semaponline.org.

Katie Cavanagh is the Farms Forever Coordinator at SEMAP. She is the fifth generation on her family farm, which she and her husband Brian manage and operate as a pick-yourown pumpkin patch.

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