

A team approach to transitioning LSP launches a transition coach initiative

By Karen Stettler

As a Land Stewardship Project staff member, I have been involved in some aspect of beginning farmer training for the past 15 years. Over these many years there has been significant growth in the number and quality of trainings for beginning farmers in our region. Today, many organizations in addition to LSP are training and supporting beginning farmers. This is an important development and is already resulting in more farmers on the land. We are seeing that more diversified farms are critical to protecting the land and our individual and collective security and wealth.

Strides have been made, certainly, to provide a more comprehensive training program for those who want to pursue farming as a career. If one wants to start farming, these learning and networking opportunities can really help make the dream a reality. Yet, barriers still exist that are preventing beginning farmers from getting started. One significant barrier is accessing land to farm. All the training and preparation for farming in the world does little good if the beginning

farmer has no place to farm.

Tom Reay, a recent Farm Beginnings graduate, is an example of someone who left the family farm operation he grew up on in Iowa and has yet to find the 40 to 80 acres of land he needs to fully launch his own livestock grazing enterprise. He has the experience and the passion for farming and is biding his time with an in-town job until he can find the right farming opportunity. He realizes that he will probably have to rent to start out. Even though he would love to own land eventually, he doesn't know if that is a realistic goal.

The price of land is a significant barrier. But it has values that go beyond the going market price, and these values must be taken into account when considering the future of farmland.

Affordable access to land

"We have such an intimate relationship with our farm—the land, the animals—it is like having another child," says farmer Maren Holst, whose family has completed a transition of their operation to the next generation. During that process, they thought about what they value and how they could make sure the legacy they leave is well

rooted in those values. "We want to know that the farm and land will continue to be well cared for in the future."

Unfortunately, Holst's example of completing a transition plan before it's too late is all too rare in farm country. Although there are resources, trainings and coffee shop experts that lay out farm transition options, it is often difficult to line up those options with one's values and put a plan together. Bill McMillin, who farms near the southeast Minnesota community of Plainview, says, "I go to these transition workshops and come away with lots of information. It's good information and gets me thinking, and yet I still find when I return home I am not sure how to begin to put all the pieces together and get started."

LSP's farmer-members are leading the way, as many are trying to figure out next steps for their farms and land. LSP is working to help these farmers continue their stewardship-farming legacy through grassroots action.

For example, LSP worked with the Plainview Area Land Access Organizing Committee last winter to prioritize what was needed to get more new farmers established in the community (see the No. 1, 2012, Land Stewardship Letter, page 9). Among the top ideas developed was the creation of an objective third party that could help families work together and navigate the farm transfer planning process. The farmers on the committee realized that what they had in mind was a type of "coach" that could help identify what individual farm families need to get started in the farm succession planning process.

Transition coaches: the bridge

Led by this community committee, LSP is training two "transition coaches" who will eventually work directly with families. The farm transition coaches aim to help families get started in the process and move toward the peace of mind that comes with a well thought through transition plan.

These coaches can help families in different ways, depending on each particular situation. In some cases, a family's biggest hurdle might be making the time to start the transition process. For other families, helping to facilitate a collective goal could be the starting point, while others might focus on figuring out what the transition planning process looks like, as well as what kind of information and timeline is needed.

Just as there is no one way to put together a farm business, it follows that there is no one way to put together a farm transition. A good farm transition coach can offer guid-



A recent LSP Farm Beginnings field day at Prairie Drifter Farm in Litchfield, Minn., featured crop specialist Thaddeus McCamant talking about managing diseases, weeds and pests in diversified vegetable operations. Such in-depth on-farm educational events provide beginning farmers invaluable training, but do little good if those wannabe farmers can't get access to land. (photo by Nick Olson)

Coach, see page 19...



Farm Beginnings graduates Kristine and Ryan Jepsen recently hosted a workshop on producing grass-finished beef. Farm successions involving livestock enterprises can be particularly challenging. (photo by Aimee Finley)

...Coach, from page 18

ance at whatever place the family is starting. When the family is ready to move on, or there is a need larger than the coach can handle, that coach will be able to connect the family to resources that already exist. (For further details about what a farm transition coach is and is not, see the sidebar below.)

LSP is pioneering this new farm transition resource with the help of LouAnne Kling and Paul Wotzka. A long time LSP

member and farmer herself, Kling brings a wealth of knowledge and experience as the former coordinator of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Farm Advocates Program. She trained and worked with volunteers who in turn helped farmers with financial planning and advocacy. She continues to work as a volunteer farm and small business advocate. Kling realizes that the successful navigation of farm transitions will be necessary to ensure a new generation of farmers on the land.

In addition to currently working as a

Interested in having a transition coach?
 If you are interested in more information about working with a farm transition coach, contact LSP's Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

consulting hydrologist on water quality issues in southeast Minnesota, Wotzka runs his family's organic farm near the community of Weaver. His interest in being a farm transition coach stems from work he has done over the years to keep innovative, diversified farmers on the land.

Starting the process

As we proceed in this first year of the transition coach initiative, we will be working with a limited number of families to help them take the first steps toward a completed farm transition plan. In the process we will also be doing a thorough evaluation of the benefits of working with a farm transition coach. If we see an increased demand for this service, LSP and the Plainview Land Access Organizing Committee will consider how to grow this resource. □

Karen Stettler, a former director of the Farm Beginnings Program, now coordinates LSP's Community Engagement and Impact initiative. She can be reached at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

Overview of farm transition coach

A farm transition coach is:

- ◆ Someone who meets with family members to listen to their story and help them get started and continue down the road to a farm transition.
- ◆ Someone who asks hard questions to make sure people are really thinking all the way around the issues.
- ◆ Someone who can be an objective third party if two generations are working together (either related or not related).
- ◆ Someone who has an understanding of resources available to families and a sense of who to engage when.
- ◆ Someone who can help the families think through their next steps. This could

mean helping to develop a framework for moving forward, developing timelines and holding the families accountable.

- ◆ Someone who can be a support person along the journey of the farm transition—which could possibly stretch to beyond a year or more.
- ◆ Someone who assesses when their own skills are not enough to handle the situation and knows when to call in other resource people.
- ◆ Someone who is able to work confidentially with families—the information shared is not public and will not be shared.

A farm transition coach is not:

- ◆ Someone intended to be an expert on

such things as tax law, legal implications of decisions and the ability to assess the financial validity of a farm operation.

- ◆ Someone who does the work for the family.
- ◆ Someone who is a "matchmaker"—rather it is someone who is considered a conduit for making connections with beginning farmers.

A family requesting a farm transition coach MUST:

- ◆ Be willing to meet with the coach.
- ◆ Be willing to do the work needed to move the farm transition forward.
- ◆ Help honestly evaluate the value of the service the coach provides.