

A Transition Power Team

A Farm Transfers Ownership & a Farmer Transfers into a New Role

What's that stuff in soil that's supposed to provide humans a sense of wellbeing? You know, like a protozoa-based version of Prozac? Emmalyn Kayser is trying to come up with the name on a recent March afternoon as she and Chris Burkhouse squat in a high tunnel and busily weeded spinach seeded the previous fall. It's 40 degrees outside and snow is piled up on this vegetable farm in Wisconsin's Saint Croix River Valley, but thanks to the wonders of the greenhouse effect, it's hovering around 80 degrees above the spinach beds; moisture drips from the hoop house's plastic, making for a muggy, July-like environment.

"Actinomycetes!" Kayser, who studied soil science in college, says excitedly. She explains that these are a type of bacteria that give freshly turned soil that intoxicating "earthy" smell. Kayser, 32, goes on to hypothesize that it's the aromatic earth that's making it possible for Burkhouse to enjoy what many people see as drudgery: weeding.

The 53-year-old Burkhouse responds that, for whatever reason, she in fact *does* like weeding, especially when she can focus on such a simple task and not have to worry about the other headaches of running a farm: marketing, bookkeeping, employee management. This is the first growing season in decades that she is not working the soil of Foxtail Farm as a co-owner.

"It's freeing, in a way," says Burkhouse. "It's like I get the best of all worlds. I get to be here, I get to help be a part of things and be a part of decision making on the side. But I'm not responsible for everything. I've been responsible for enough years."

In December, Kayser and her husband, Cody Fitzpatrick, officially took ownership of Foxtail Farm, a thriving Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation that over three decades has built up an extensive infrastructure and membership base. The story of this farm transition centers around several factors, including clear communication and good planning, with a large dollop of serendipity tossed in. But one of the reasons Foxtail's former owners were able to pull off this passing of the torch was that

by mentoring dozens of farmers over the decades, they had set themselves up to have the right folks on hand when it was time for a change. Just as importantly, the new owners who walked through that door actually had enough experience under their belts that a farm with extensive infrastructure in place was not as intimidating as it could have been for a typical beginning farmer. And one of the things that's easing the handoff is that Burkhouse is staying on as an employee and adviser for the time being, providing a linkage between the farm's past and its future.



Chris Burkhouse (right), shown here with Emmalyn Kayser, says switching from being a co-owner to an employee of Foxtail Farm has helped her transition out of three decades of being involved in the business side of producing vegetables. "It's freeing, in a way," she says. (LSP Photo)

"We're getting a jump-start with all of Chris's experience in a way that we can exercise trial and error in new ways," says Fitzpatrick. "I think there's going to be a lot of 'Hey Chris, what about this?' situations that we wouldn't have at our disposal if this was a strict buyer-seller relationship where the former owners go elsewhere."

Bucket Farming

Chris and Paul Burkhouse started a version of Foxtail in 1989, just across the Saint Croix River in Minnesota. In those years, they sold vegetables from a self-service roadside stand where people dropped money into a Kemps ice cream bucket. They eventually adopted the CSA model and began

growing their membership. In 2004, Foxtail was moved to a 62-acre patch of ground near the Wisconsin community of Osceola. The Burkhouses increased their CSA membership to around 320 and establishing four high tunnels, an extensive root cellar storage system, packing facilities, and a commercial kitchen. When cover crops were included, they had over 18 acres under cultivation.

In 2013, Foxtail switched from a traditional CSA model to providing "winter shares." That involved growing year-round utilizing the four high tunnels, and then storing and preserving the fruits of their labor, making deliveries to members from October through April, with an additional spring share. Chris says the winter model evened out the workload for them and their employees and gave members access to local, fresh vegetables at a time when that kind of food can be hard to find.

Throughout the years, one of the things that Paul and Chris emphasized was that they didn't want their farm to just raise vegetables — they also wanted it to produce new farmers. They've had an estimated 70-80 employees over the years, including several graduates of the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (see page 32). Around two-dozen former employees stayed on the operation for a second or third year and, through an incubator arrangement, used Foxtail land and infrastructure to start their own enterprises while working part-time for the Burkhouses. Many of those second/third-year apprentices have since launched their own farms.

The Burkhouses took farmer training seriously, with Paul leading short courses and discussions on everything from the basics of the internal combustion engine to soil management. They did weekly walk-arounds

assessing each vegetable plot — what needed to be done and why. They included staff in all aspects of the farm business, not only growing and harvesting produce, but also infrastructure management, marketing, and financing.

Part of the training involved making it clear that farming was not an easy career path. Chris and Paul would write down all the expenses involved, and ask questions like, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Our approach was to inform folks as much as possible about what they're getting into," says Chris. "There's going to be surprises, but you don't want the surprises to be overwhelming."

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Northern Exposure

By the time Kayser and Fitzpatrick came to work at Foxtail in 2018, they had experienced their share of farming surprises while raising vegetables in Alaska for 10 years. On the plus side, they had learned that when you raise vegetables in a somewhat remote place with such a short growing season, the local demand is significant. However, anytime you need something as simple as a screw, it can be a three-hour drive to obtain it.

They both grew up in Minneapolis and met in kindergarten. Kayser majored in agronomy and soil science in college, and Fitzpatrick studied music. She was passionate about food and the natural world, making raising vegetables in the interior of Alaska a perfect fit. They enjoyed the experience and learned a lot about using high tunnels and other structures to extend the season. However, Kayser and Fitzpatrick eventually decided they wanted to raise food closer to their home roots. Through the Good Food Jobs website (www.goodfoodjobs.com) the young couple learned that Foxtail, which is less than an hour's drive from the Twin Cities, had openings.

The Transition

Kayser and Fitzpatrick concede that when they started at Foxtail in September 2018, they thought it would simply be one more way to gain farming experience while living closer to their families in Minnesota. The Burkhouses, for their part, had always known they would eventually need to think about what would happen to the farm after they retired. They have a conservation easement on the land, and felt they owed it to their members, who had been very loyal over the years, to keep it a CSA operation. But talk of transitioning the farm was expedited in the winter of 2018-2019 when Paul made it clear he didn't want to farm anymore, and his and Chris's marriage ended.

Fortunately, they had already worked with Kayser and Fitzpatrick enough to know they might be a good fit for taking over the farm. Not only had they survived an extensive interview and application process (see sidebar), but they were competent utilizing season extension methods, got along well with the CSA members, and had ideas for how to expand the farm's enterprise offerings. Plus, they were young, but not so young that the idea of a farm with lots of infrastructure completely intimidated them.

Ironically, an operation with as much infrastructure as Foxtail's can be its own worst enemy when it comes to being attractive to a new generation of farmer. For one thing,

it's going to be more expensive to purchase equipment, buildings, and other aspects of a well-established operation. In addition, it may have infrastructure and enterprises that a new farmer doesn't need.

In the case of Kayser and Fitzpatrick, they had farmed with little infrastructure while in Alaska, and were ready to step into something more established.

"When Cody and I were weighing the pros and cons of this property, it was a ben-



Kayser and Fitzpatrick say having Burkhouse stay on after the sale has been key to a smooth transition. It creates a "power team" in a lot of ways, according to Kayser. (LSP Photo)

efit that it had all this infrastructure because we were already starting at 10, instead of really having to start from zero and build up to 10," says Kayser. Or, as Fitzpatrick puts it succinctly, "We want to grow food for people now."

During 2019, the older and younger farmers began drawing up detailed plans for the transition and meeting formally as much as

possible — something that can be difficult when you work together informally every day. Chris and Paul split the farm 50-50 and Kayser and Fitzpatrick obtained a beginning farmer loan through the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). Obtaining beginning farmer loans through FSA can be a lengthy process, but they benefited from the fact that they were applying for the loan during the fall, not the winter, when many people are seeking operating loans and the offices are extra busy. The younger farmers also had the advantage that Paul and Chris were able to provide years of financial data showing their CSA model was viable. That's important, given that FSA offices are more accustomed to loaning money out for conventional crop and livestock operations.

"We had a track record that we were able to document and put forward that this can be done on this property, has been done on this property. It's generated this income over this many years. And so, with this plan, that's transferable," says Chris.

Kayser and Fitzpatrick say that getting numbers from Foxtail on everything from input costs to its average electricity bill also helped them present a solid business plan to the FSA.

When drawing up a purchase agreement, the two couples went through and identified what equipment and other infrastructure was needed on the farm for it to continue as a CSA for Kayser and Fitzpatrick, and therefore what should be included in the overall farm purchase. Chris and Paul held an equipment auction to pay off an operating loan they had, and through the auction the new farm owners purchased any equipment

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Prepping to Open that Door

Emmalyn Kayser likens the circumstances that allowed she and Cody Fitzpatrick to take over Foxtail Farm to approaching a closed door that was opened for them before they even knocked.

One reason it turned out to be the right door is that Chris and Paul Burkhouse spent decades mentoring beginning farmers. By the time Kayser and Fitzpatrick showed up, the older farmers knew what they were looking for when thinking about transitioning Foxtail to someone who could operate a local-food agricultural enterprise long into the future.

For one thing, they require people who work on the farm to have at least one year of vegetable production experience and to show a commitment to farming. Then there's the job interview.

"We had a set of interview questions that

kind of developed over time," says Chris. "What's the hardest thing you've ever done? Is it physical? Is it mental? Is it emotional? How do you deal with chaos? It starts a conversation."

Kayser remembers specifically the answer she gave to a question about what she would do if handed a list and left alone for the day with other farm employees.

"There was a moment of silence and I just went, 'Well, I would take the list and I would be in charge the rest of the day,'" she recalls with a laugh. "And that was very much the truth."

Burkhouse says all kidding aside, that was the right answer. "In that process of how Emmalyn answered, you get a sense of, 'Does the person know themselves?' for one thing. And then you can suss out things like, 'How do you work as a team and how do you handle conflict?'"

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they felt they needed.

In December 2019, Kayser and Fitzpatrick closed the deal on the FSA loan and became the new owners of Foxtail Farm.

On-Farm Mentor

But perhaps the most invaluable piece of “infrastructure” that came with the farm purchase is in human form. Chris has agreed to stay on as a salaried employee and adviser for at least a year. The arrangement is made easier by the fact that the farm has three separate housing units.

The new owners of Foxtail feel this part of the arrangement has been invaluable. Kayser says she and Fitzpatrick’s background in growing during the “shoulder seasons,” combined with Chris’s knowledge of what works best in local conditions, makes them a bit of a “power team.” They have been able to trade information both on the fly while doing field work, as well as in more formal sit-down meetings.

“I can just say, ‘Hey, I’m thinking this.’ And Chris will say, ‘That sounds cool, but this is what you should maybe think about too,’” says Kayser.

Maintaining a connection with Chris has also helped in transitioning the relationship between the new Foxtail owners and the farm’s CSA members, many of whom have been associated with the farm for years. Through a letter from Chris and Paul, members were informed of the transition; the response was overwhelmingly positive.

“And I think they were looking forward to seeing what else is going to happen, what’s new?” says Chris.

As it happens, changes *are* coming. The farm’s business model is being slightly modified from a full-on winter CSA to a more fall/early winter and early spring system. Kayser and Fitzpatrick would also like to look into utilizing the farm for agritourism and educational ventures related to health, wellness, and food. Chris likes that the new owners are thinking outside the box.

“We always thought, ‘There’s a lot of opportunity and potential for a number of different enterprises on this farm,’” she says.

It remains to be seen what will happen next year. For her part, Chris feels this period in-between where she is able to work on the farm as a non-owner has been

a “win-win” — she’s been able to keep her hands in the soil and practice the basics of food production, which is why she got into farming in the first place. She’s also been able to transition into a new life as someone who, after 31 years, no longer has a business interest in a vegetable enterprise.

Back in the high tunnel on that March day, Kayser jokes that if one of her ideas for the farm — converting to complete no-till — comes to fruition, there will be less exposed ground to expose Chris to all that feel-good soil life. Chris doesn’t seem worried. Exposed soil biome or no, there will be plenty of opportunities to feel good about where the farm is at, and where it’s headed.

“Our lives’ blood, sweat, and tears, both Paul and I’s, are definitely all over this farm,” she says. “And so, I feel especially rooted to this place, and knowing it’s in good hands makes me feel good, and makes me feel like this is the perfect move. □

Give it a Listen

Episode 241 of the Land Stewardship Project’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast features Chris Burkhouse, Emmalyn Kayser, and Cody Fitzpatrick talking about creating Foxtail Farm’s transition “power team”: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1299.

Removing the Spectre of Speculation

Linking Landowners & Farmers Through a Passion for Stewardship

One day last summer, Andy and Betsy Boone’s neighbor brought over his equipment and baled a cutting of hay for the beginning farmers. When it came time to pay up, the neighbor, Keith, proposed a fee for the job and then followed up with a quick question: “Is that a fair price? Because I just want you to succeed.” Andy shares this story on a sunny morning in late fall while he walks the 170-acre hilltop farm in northeastern Iowa where he and Betsy raise hogs, sheep, and chickens on pasture.

Later that day, sitting in a coffee shop a few miles north of the farm, the man who farmed and stewarded those 170 acres for almost four decades is visibly thrilled to hear Andy’s story.

“Really? That’s great. Oh, that’s wonderful,” Lyle Luzum says with a smile. “I want to thank Keith for being such a great neighbor to Andy and Betsy. That’s really important.”

Luzum has a vested interest in seeing the Boones succeed, so learning that a neighbor shares that enthusiasm is profoundly

satisfying to him. A few years ago, Lyle and his wife Sue made the farm available to the Boones via a nonprofit that focuses on getting more stewardship-minded farmers on the land. The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) relies on enthusiastic beginning farmers like the Boones who see opportunities in raising food for their communities on a small to moderate scale.

But just as importantly, it relies on landowners like the Luzums, who not only share that positive view of regenerative farming’s promise, but possess a vision of land ownership that may be a bit counter intuitive to most people involved in agriculture. Lyle, for example, sees the time he was on that farm as a temporary situation where he just happened to hold the deed, that piece of paper that tells society he’s the “owner.”

“But what you actually did is you used it while you were here for a living, for a livelihood, for life, and then you passed it on to somebody else,” he says. “To think you own it is folly — you don’t own it. So that’s the first step, is to think differently. That was a real revelation to me.”

Link in the Land Chain

To SILT’s executive director, Suzan Erem, such an enlightened attitude towards long term stewardship of the land and passing it on is key to the organization’s mission. Erem and a group of two-dozen leaders and experts involved in sustainable agriculture launched the organization in 2015 because they felt there needed to be a consistent mechanism for making sure landowners like the Luzums were connecting with farmers like the Boones. Too often, retiring farmers who are moving off the land and new agrarians who need access to that land are like ships passing in the night. They may be a good match, but the timing isn’t right, financing doesn’t work out, or they simply don’t know of each other’s existence.

Erem spent years researching various models for connecting sustainable farmers with stewardship-minded landowners. She also became a serious student of what regenerative practices were best for maintaining the ecological health of farmland. She came away from that research with two conclusions. For one, as farmers retire or simply go out of business, America is in the midst

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