

An Enigmatic Edge in Corn Country

This Gateway into Farming Hinges on Small Grains, Livestock & Soil Health

With its pool table topography and coffee-colored soils, southern Minnesota's Nicollet County perennially ranks as one of the top producers of corn and soybeans in the state, and land prices reflect it — in 2019 the average annual non-irrigated cropland rental rate in the county was \$208 per acre, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. That's \$45 above the state average. It's a great place for an established row crop farmer. But if you're a beginner looking to step out of the mainstream commodity system, launching an operation in these parts is daunting.

"It's pretty competitive around here," says Dan Coffman on a fall day while taking a break from harvest work. He and his wife, Alysha, along with their four young children, live near the town of Nicollet. "We've got a lot of well-established farmers and with the very productive land, that makes it extra competitive. Probably a double whammy for me is being a beginning farmer. It would be one thing if an established farmer tried something that didn't work out very good, but I just don't have the financial stability yet to do that."

So the 34-year-old is looking for any competitive advantage he can dig up. For example, he's pursuing diverse enterprises, value added production, and niche markets. But at the core of all that is a strategic edge that goes even deeper, literally into the dark organic matter of southern Minnesota.

"We farm using soil health practices," says Dan. "When we started farming, we just decided that's how we're going to do it, and there's not going to be any other way."

The Coffmans feel that building healthy soil utilizing no-till, cover cropping, and rotational grazing gives their farm a leg-up when it comes to resiliency in the face of challenges such as extreme weather. But it's also allowed them to gain an advantage in accessing land in the first place, a critical

issue for beginning farmers.

Two years ago, a landowner with a 280-acre parcel actually approached the Coffmans about renting it. Dan had been doing some no-till and strip-till crop production with his father-in-law, and the landowner liked how those systems protect the soil; he also wanted to see organic matter built up



Dan Coffman uses a retrofitted silage wagon as a mobile grazing headquarters for raising cattle on a remote pasture. He sees livestock as a way to add value to cover crops and to make use of the few pastures in his region that haven't been lost to corn and soybeans. (LSP Photo)

utilizing methods like cover cropping.

Dan is excited that the landlord reached out to them specifically based on what kind of farming they practice. That kind of attitude can give a beginning farmer a chance to compete for land in an area dominated by big row crop operations.

The landowner gave the Coffmans a break on the rental rate, but that's not the only benefit that's resulted from this lease. Dan's relationship with the landlord led the young crop and livestock producer to take the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings class, which, he says, gave him one more edge in the farming game: a deep background in business planning and innovative marketing skills.

Beginning Farmer Tax Break

Dan didn't grow up on a working farm, but was introduced to soil conservation at an

early age by his father, Tom, who recently retired from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Dan studied ag systems management at North Dakota State University and, after graduating in 2009, worked as an agronomist for co-ops in that state. In 2015, he and Alysha returned to Nicollet County, where her family farms. Dan works as a truck driver and helps his in-laws on their cropping operation. He always knew he wanted to farm fulltime, but wasn't interested in the large-scale, input-intensive systems he worked with in North Dakota.

And when he read *Dirt to Soil*, the book by regenerative farming rock star Gabe Brown, the young farmer was even more convinced that building a system based on healthy soil and a diverse system that integrates crops, pasture, and livestock was the way to go ecologically and economically.

As it happens, the Coffmans' search for rental land coincided with the launching of a new state program that eases land access for people like them. By renting to a beginning farmer, the owner of that 280-acre parcel qualified for a tax break through the Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit, which was championed by LSP for over 10 years before it was passed by the Minnesota Legislature in 2017. This law provides an incentive to sell or rent land or other agricultural assets — machinery, buildings, facilities, livestock, etc. — to a beginning farmer. In order for the landowner to qualify for the credit, the beginning farmer must enroll in a financial management program approved by the Rural Finance Authority. Dan chose Farm Beginnings as his qualifying course. The 12-month class helps participants clarify their goals and strengths, establish a strong enterprise plan, and start building their operation (*see page 26*).

Dan liked the course's emphasis on goal setting, financial management, and marketing via direct sales and niche products. But he also liked that the farmers who lead class sessions emphasize healthy soil and diversity in their production systems. He saw Farm Beginnings as offering ideas for not only farming in a way that was good for the soil, but making it pay. So, every few weeks during the winter of 2019-2020, Dan made the five-hour round-trip drive to Menomonie, Wis., for the class sessions.

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Although Dan has an ag-related college degree and some farming experience, he felt that he needed more grounding in the financial aspects of running a business. One of the requirements of the class is to develop a business plan for a student's potential farming enterprise, something Dan feels helped him think deeply about the reality of making farming a fulltime career. His business plan was centered around utilizing diversity and niche markets as much as possible.

Fortunately, his enrollment in Farm Beginnings led Dan to connect with a mentor who has spent decades building up an operation based on diversity and creative marketing: Carmen Fernholz. Fernholz, a pioneering organic farmer in southwestern Minnesota (see *the No. 1, 2020, Land Stewardship Letter*), showed Coffman that growing for specialty markets could be lucrative and practical. He also encouraged the young farmer to enroll in Farm Business Management, a statewide educational program where instructors work one-on-one with farmers to help them with the details of managing their books.

"The financial piece in farming is really important, and without it you could be stuck real fast," says Dan.

Kernza Connection

Fernholz's promotion of creative innovation based on diversity and good old-fashioned financial and marketing savvy struck home for Dan when he attended a field day the older farmer hosted in 2019. The event featured Fernholz's work with Kernza, an intermediate wheatgrass that can produce grain, livestock forage, and straw for at least three years in a row without having to be replanted. Farmers like Carmen have been working with the University of Minnesota's Forever Green initiative to propagate a line of Kernza that will do well in the Upper Midwest. At the same time, businesses such as General Mills have been working to show there is a viable consumer market for food and beverage products made from the grain.

One thing that impressed Dan when he was working in North Dakota was the amount of small grains many farmers produced. He immediately saw Kernza's potential for making small grains a viable part of his southern Minnesota farming operation. And since it can be used as a forage, it fits with his plans to introduce livestock into the mix as well.

Within a month of attending the field day, the young farmer had planted 10 acres of Kernza with seed obtained from the U of M. On a recent October morning, he walks into

his garage and opens one of the totes that holds the results of that planting. He scoops out a double handful of the small elongated grain, which is being sold to a specialty miller. In addition, Dan was able to produce dozens of large bales of forage from those acres. Coffman planted 20 more acres of Kernza this fall, and is looking forward to grazing some in the future.

Because Kernza can be grown for at least three years without replanting, this makes it an ideal crop for making the three-year transition into certified organic; the Coffmans



Coffman hopes Kernza, a form of intermediate wheatgrass, can play a key role in a diversified operation based on small grains, livestock, and building soil health. "It's not just what Kernza does for the budget on paper, but also what it does for the ecosystem," he says. (LSP Photo)

want to eventually raise all their crops for the organic market.

"It's not just what Kernza does for the budget on paper, but also what it does for the ecosystem," says Dan. "There are fewer tillage passes, living roots in the soil 365-days-a-year, sinking carbon into the ground. It's tough to put a price on those benefits."

Diversity, Distance & Downsides

However, it's clear there are challenges to stepping out of the monocultural mainstream. On the 450 acres the Coffmans rented in 2020, along with the Kernza, they raised heritage winter wheat, rye, oats, alfalfa, corn, and non-GMO soybeans. They like the flexibility having such diversity offers, but Dan concedes it got to be a bit much

grappling with different harvest systems and schedules. Dan's truck-driving job is fulltime, and the closest rented acres are 10 miles away; plus, he and Alysha have a new baby. "Next year, we're going to simplify things a bit," he says.

They have also been reminded that come harvest time, the transportation, storage, and marketing infrastructure in southern Minnesota is set up for two main crops — corn and soybeans — to the exclusion of almost everything else. For example, in 2019 they had an arrangement to sell their food-grade rye to a company just a dozen miles away. At harvest, Dan called the mill and was chagrined to learn, yes, they could take the grain, but not at their Minnesota location. He ended up driving two hours one-way to a mill in Iowa to dump his harvest.

It was yet one more reminder that when you step off the corn-soybean treadmill, there's a price to pay. But as a beginning farmer, Dan sees accessing specialty organic markets as a critical way to make a go of it in the long term. Fortunately, he has the support of his landlords, who have provided five-year leases. Long-term rental arrangements are critical when one puts time and effort into building soil and getting certified organic.

The Coffmans are also committed to making livestock a key part of their operation, despite the logistical challenges. Cattle can add value to cover crops while building soil health, as well as make use of the few remaining odd pastures in the region that haven't been lost to corn and soybeans. Again, this makes the young farmers oddities in a region where livestock such as hogs and dairy cattle have been taken off the land and concentrated into large CAFOs.

In 2020 the Coffmans were able to rotationally graze five cow-calf pairs on an odd-sized rented pasture that had escaped the plow. It was a challenge — it has no water or good fencing infrastructure, and is 10 miles from their home. Dan made do by retrofitting an old silage wagon as a moveable grazing-mobile. It has a 1,500-gallon water tank, along with storage for hay and extra fencing supplies.

"I don't have to say, 'Oh shoot, I forgot pliers, and I'm 10 miles away.' It's all there when I need it," he says.

Such improvising will no doubt become familiar to the Coffmans as they figure out more ways to give their farming enterprise a competitive edge in monoculture country. Plans include adding more cattle to the herd, getting certified organic, and finding consistent markets for their production.

"In his book, I think Gabe Brown's quote at the end says, 'Do something,'" says Dan. "So, okay, it's time." □