

A Raw Deal on Farmland

Using Farm Beginnings & Soil Health to Push Marginal Land Beyond Expectations

By Brian DeVore

There are upsides to launching a farm on raw, open land: no broken-down outbuildings or junk piles to deal with, the ability to truly start anew from the soil up. Then...there's the other side of the fence, so to speak.

"I decided to move the sheep before they move themselves," says Hannah Bernhardt with a laugh as she finishes setting up a new paddock on a windswept pasture in north-eastern Minnesota on an October afternoon. The white wool of the sheep pops in contrast to the mix of dormant grasses and still-growing green forage in the new grazing area Bernhardt has formed with the portable electronet. It turns out one of the major downsides to a piece of land that lacks even the most basic of infrastructure is loose livestock and the need to do fencing on the go. Once, on Bernhardt's birthday no less, the cattle disappeared. Surprise! It turned out they had walked two miles to the town of Finlayson. And don't even get her started on the headaches involved with getting water to livestock on open land: hauling lots of buckets, cracked tanks in winter — you get the picture.

"I usually tell people the only way I would recommend starting with raw land is if you're an insane person who wants to work non-stop," says Bernhardt, 38. But the 160 acres of former hay ground she and her husband, Jason Misik, 45, bought in 2016 is looking a little less raw these days. Medicine Creek Farm (www.medicinecreekfarm.com) now has a house, outbuildings, water lines, and yes, some permanent fencing, all constructed by the beginning farmers. It's also home to a thriving pasture-based direct-to-consumer livestock enterprise. A lot of sweat equity has gone into this transformation. And backing up that hard work is the strong belief on the part of Bernhardt and Misik that sub-par

ag land far from traditional Farm Country can exceed expectations with the help of the kind of innovative management they learned through the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings Program.

"We were able to buy 10 times more land here than we could have afforded in southern Minnesota," says Misik. And for Bernhardt, that not only means they have more room to make a fulltime living on the land, but an opportunity to have a positive impact on a bigger patch of real estate. "How much land can you improve in southern Minnesota when you can only afford to buy five acres? It's like if you can afford 160 acres, think of the good you can do improving that amount of soil," she says.



"We were able to buy 10 times more land here than we could have afforded in southern Minnesota," says Jason Misik, shown here with Hannah Bernhardt. (LSP Photo)

A View from the Rooftop

Bernhardt is intimately familiar with what prime farmland looks like. She grew up in southern Minnesota's Martin County, one of the top producers of corn and soybeans in the state (its many CAFOs also put it in the top tier as a hog producer). She was born when the 1980s farm crisis was raging, and her father quit farming fulltime by the time Bernhardt was 5. She received a clear message at a young age: it's next to impossible to get started and make a financial

success in farming, at least in the heart of the Corn Belt. College took her to the East Coast and she later worked as a lobbyist for a Minneapolis-based law firm.

But her agrarian roots were calling, so Bernhardt started working for the National Young Farmers Coalition, an opportunity that took her to New York. Through that experience, she saw that there were opportunities in agriculture that go beyond raising corn and soybeans. She met farmers who were running Community Supported Agriculture operations and raising pasture-raised livestock for direct sale to consumers. At one point, she was working on two rooftop farms in Brooklyn. "It was really funny — like I grew up on a farm and here I am growing vegetables on a roof in New York City," she recalls.

Bernhardt became particularly convinced there are alternative ways to make it in farming when she worked on a pasture-based livestock operation in the Hudson Valley. That experience also won her over to the economic and ecological benefits of regenerative livestock production, and she returned to Minnesota to launch her farming career.

Misik had little background in farming, but grew up in a dairy producing community in southeastern Wisconsin. His lack of farming experience is one of the reasons the couple enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course during the winter of 2015-2016. The other reason was that Bernhardt has always been concerned about her lack of financial acumen. That was also a reason they took LSP's follow-up course, *Journeyperson*, a few years later.

"Through Farm Beginnings, Hannah wrote a really impressive business plan," says Misik. "That's probably the single most important thing. Hannah is a perfectionist, so she took it *all* the way. There were pie charts, spreadsheets, and photographs."

"I overcompensated," Bernhardt admits with a shrug.

The Farm Beginnings course, which LSP has been offering for over two decades in the Minnesota-Wisconsin-northern Iowa region (*pages 4 and 32*), is led by established farmers and offers opportunities for doing the kind of networking that supports new ag operations as they get up and running. The *Journeyperson* course takes a deeper dive into whole farm planning strategies like Holistic Management, and sets participants up with mentors, as well as an instructor with

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the Farm Business Management Association, a Minnesota state initiative that guides farmers through financial management decisions.

Bernhardt's overachieving business plan paid off: it helped the couple obtain financing through the Farm Service Agency to get their farm started, including a microloan that helps with infrastructure. With the help of funding from the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Bernhardt and Misik have also established an extensive fencing and watering system for rotational grazing, although they'd like to establish more perimeter fencing. They have also benefited from private loans provided by family members.

Pure Potential

The couple didn't necessarily start out to be modern-day homesteaders.

Bernhardt, in particular, was aware of the advantages of farming in what's traditionally considered an agricultural area: fertile soil, farmsteads with basic infrastructure, and support services like co-ops and repair shops. But after looking at almost two dozen farms in the Minnesota-Wisconsin area, they were struck by a harsh reality: prime ag land is extraordinarily expensive — land goes for around \$8,000 an acre in Bernhardt's home county. On top of that, many farmsteads are being bulldozed to make room for more corn and soybeans, leaving few options for obtaining a farm that can also be a home for people and livestock.

At around \$1,200 an acre, the price was right for the 160 acres they found in Pine County, roughly an hour-and-a-half north of the Twin Cities. It's in an area that's a bit of a transition zone between the agricultural region of southern Minnesota and the North Woods — smaller stands of timber, boggy spots, and meadows dominate. Starting from scratch can be daunting, but Bernhardt and Misik felt that besides their young energy, they had two other competitive advantages. For one, through Farm Beginnings they had learned how to create a good business plan and had met established farmers who were able to make a viable living on relatively few acres direct-marketing products like pasture-based meat.

And although this part of Minnesota doesn't have many of the ancillary businesses farms rely on, it does have a critical service for a direct-to-consumer livestock

operation: a USDA certified meat processor is located just 20 miles from Medicine Creek Farm. Many parts of the Upper Midwest lack local meat processing, so this is a huge plus for Bernhardt and Misik. They say that having a business that can process animals into retail cuts gives them more flexibility in reaching customers who don't have enough freezer space for something like a quarter-beef.

And it wasn't just the selling price of the farm that made it a good financial risk. Misik works off the farm doing set design for commercials, and in order for him to be on the farm fulltime, the operation will need to expand capacity. That will mean more animals, which may mean more land.

"It we wanted to rent, we could rent additional farmland for \$15 an acre here," says Misik. "The same farmland down south that we were looking at rents for \$275 an acre. And so, our opportunity to expand, as we get this place paid off, is just much greater."



Before it was bulldozed, the beginning farmers rescued an 1880s-era barn from southern Minnesota and reassembled it on their land. The barn's former home sold for \$12,000 per acre, says Misik. (LSP Photo)

Another benefit to being in this particular community is the presence of Janet McNally at Tamarack Lamb and Wool, a sheep producer and guard dog breeder who has served as a mentor to Bernhardt and Misik.

Finally, a critical factor that gave them the confidence to take a chance on marginal land goes deeper, literally into the ground itself. Financial analysts like to quip that, "Past performance is no guarantee of future results." That could certainly be said of soil in places like southern Minnesota, which has enjoyed an historical run of natural high fertility. But past performance doesn't mean it has a lock on future potential, particularly as intensive monocropping takes its toll. Bernhardt said she became aware of that fact after she and Misik participated in a Practical Farmers of Iowa tour of Gabe Brown's operation in North Dakota.

Give it a Listen

Episode 247 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features Hannah Bernhardt and Jason Misik talking about how they are using sweat equity and the building of soil health to transform a marginal piece of ground far from Corn Country: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1355.

Brown has shown that one can make a good living utilizing rotational grazing, no-till, diverse rotations, and multi-species cover cropping to build organic matter on marginal soils. Utilizing innovative livestock production systems to make a living on land that's not suitable for bin-busting corn yields is particularly attractive to beginning farmers with limited resources.

Bernhardt came away from that tour convinced that they could make underperforming land pay off eventually by building its soil through practices like managed rotational grazing. Misik was impressed too, and gets emotional when he thinks about the epiphany he had on that trip.

"For the first time in my life I was, like, this is proof that something positive could happen in the world," he says. "I could see it happening here."

Come for the Carbon

On this October day, it's beginning to look like things are indeed happening here. The rotational grazing system they raise their sheep, cattle, and pigs under is building soil organic matter, resulting in more productive pastures and thriving animals. The beginning farmers say their carrying capacity has already increased in just a few short years.

"Things are changing quickly and the biology's waking up," says Misik.

They market their beef, pork, and lamb direct to mostly Twin Cities and Duluth customers. Numbers fluctuate, but their sheep herd numbers around 80, and they have 35 head of cattle and 20 pigs; they also breed and sell guard dogs. Like many direct-to-consumer meat producers, Medicine Creek Farm sold out in 2020 as a result of the pandemic raising people's concerns about the source of their meat. Bernhardt estimates that in order for Misik to quit his off-farm job, they will need to double

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2021-2022 FB Class

The 2021-2022 edition of LSP's Farm Beginnings course is now accepting applications. Classes will begin in the fall. See page 32 for details.

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livestock numbers, either by increasing the productivity of their existing acres or acquiring more land.

Bernhardt is adept at using social media to tell her farm's story. Her animals and the land are extremely photogenic and while scrolling through Medicine Creek's Instagram feed, it's easy to forget how much work has gone into setting up this operation. Misik built their house and outbuildings, filling knowledge gaps by viewing YouTube videos on such things as plumbing. Their latest construction project is a reminder of why they ended up launching a farm far from a prime row crop production region.

After setting up the temporary paddock, the couple head back across open pastures

to the farmstead and take refuge from the autumn wind in an 1880s-era barn that is in a state of being reassembled. Misik found it on a farmstead in southern Minnesota that was slated for dozing. He carefully took it apart and labeled the timbers with animal ear tags before hauling it north. Its former home sold for \$12,000 an acre, he says.

As they sit in an old church pew (Misik rescued it from his hometown) in the barn's cavernous loft, the couple talks about how they aren't finished when it comes to building a farm from the roots up. Their long-term goal is to make the reassembled barn into a combination events/education center, on-farm store, and Airbnb. They are also working constantly on building soil health using tweaks to their rotational grazing system. For example, they recently expanded bale grazing to more distant pastures as a way to improve those paddocks while providing animals nutrition during the winter. And recalling their training in Holistic Management goal setting, they are also

working on making sure farm work doesn't dominate: they have a 3-year-old son, Harvey, and have committed to doing things like going swimming more this summer.

Guiding the young farmers' efforts is the overall goal of making the land an important link between the health of the soil and how eaters view their food choices, as well as what public policies they support. From the beginning, Bernhardt has emphasized through the farm's website and social media outreach that their "regenerative" system not only provides healthy, happy meat, but improves the environment, producing, among other things, carbon-sequestering soil.

"I feel like we're luring customers in with happy animals and then trying to teach them soil health," she says. "Someday, maybe they'll come for the soil health education and then get some meat on the side, instead of the other way around."

In other words, this non-Farm Country farm has the potential to have a positive impact far beyond its fence lines. □

Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse

Are you a beginning farmer looking to rent or purchase farmland in the Midwest? Or are you an established farmer/landowner in the Midwest who is seeking a beginning farmer to purchase or rent your land, or to work with in a partnership/employee situation? Then consider having your information circulated via the Land Stewardship Project's *Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse*. To fill out an online form and for more information, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/seekingfarmersseekinglandclearinghouse. You can also obtain forms by e-mailing LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org, or by calling her at 507-523-3366. Below are a few recent listings. For the latest listings, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/seekingfarmersseekinglandclearinghouse.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Kari Boyer is seeking to rent 1-5 acres of farmland in *Illinois or Wisconsin*. Land that has not been sprayed for several years and includes 1-3 tillable acres is preferred. Contact: Kari Boyer, 618-581-6390, karielizabethboyer@gmail.com.

◆ Camille Mefleh and Luciano Chance are seeking to purchase farmland in the *western Wisconsin area between the Twin Cities and Menomonie*, ideally within 1.5 hours of the Twin Cities. They are looking for at least 25 acres. Contact: Camille Mefleh and Luciano Chance, 612-226-4397, camille.mefleh@gmail.com.

◆ Mark Sloo is seeking to purchase farmland in *Minnesota or Wisconsin (relatively close to the Twin Cities)*. He and his partner will consider all sizes of farms. Contact: Mark Sloo, 612-879-8838, msloo@msn.com.

◆ Kate and Peter McColl are seeking to purchase 5+ acres of tillable farmland in *western Wisconsin or southeastern Minnesota (Winona and Onalaska area)*. Contact: Kate and Peter McColl, 507-460-2465, katolah@gmail.com.

◆ Mikayla Birschbach is seeking to purchase a maximum of 100 acres of farmland in *eastern Minnesota or western Wisconsin*. A farm with at least 70 acres of pasture, a house, and a milking parlor is preferred. Contact: Mikayla Birschbach, 920-517-1650, mikayla.birschbach@gmail.com.

◆ Xee Vang is seeking to rent 1 acre of tillable farmland in *Minnesota*. Land with water is preferred. Contact: Xee Vang, 612-407-0874, xeevang02@gmail.com.

◆ Minnesota Agrarian Commons is looking to purchase 70-150 acres within a one-hour radius of *Minnesota's Twin Cities or along the corridor between the Twin Cities and Rochester*. Agrarian Commons is looking for a gift, bargain sale, or market value sale to be achieved through Agrarian Trust. Contact: Robin Moore, 320-321-5244, rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org.

Farmland Available

◆ Susan Swanson has for sale 3.25 acres of farmland in *Washington County in the Twin Cities, Minn., region (Marine on St. Croix)*. There is 1 tillable acre and 1 pasture acre, and the land has not been sprayed for several years.

There is the possibility of leasing 9 acres adjoining the property. The asking price is \$289,000. Contact: Susan Swanson, 651-442-5789, smswan17@gmail.com.

◆ Suzan Erem of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust has for sale 53 acres of certified organic farmland in *southwestern Iowa's Pottawattamie County (near Honey Creek)*. The land consists of 33 tillable acres and 18 acres of timber suitable for agroforestry in the Loess Hills just north of Omaha and Council Bluffs. Contact: Suzan Erem, 319-480-4241, suzan@silt.org.

◆ Margaret Lyngholm has for sale 30 acres of farmland in *southeastern Minnesota's Fillmore County (near Lanesboro)*. The land consists of 4 tillable acres, 4 pasture acres, and 16 forest acres. Contact: Margaret Lyngholm, 507-250-5065, strawbale100@gmail.com.

◆ Terry Rikke has for rent 5 acres of farmland in *west-central Minnesota's Kandiyohi County (near Lake Lillian)*. The land consists of 2 pasture acres. The land has not been sprayed for several years. Contact: Terry Rikke, 612-212-6407, notstandingstill@gmail.com.