



Owner/Renter Discussion Tips 2/1/18

A formal written agreement is much easier to create when you are starting out fresh with a new renter. It's harder when you have a years-long informal agreement with a renter to suddenly start demanding changes in soil management. How do we get a renter to agree to certain practices when the relationship is based on an informal handshake. How does one transition it to a written agreement?

- Project humility. Validate at least some parts of what the renter is saying. They aren't just proud of how cheaply they can do things. They are also proud of how innovative they can be.
- Start with what's working and what's working well. E.g., "thanks for clearing the snow from my mother's driveway." Feel free to tell farmer that they do certain things very well, like cover cropping, crop rotations, etc. Don't just dwell on what the farmer is doing wrong.
- Is there a way to bring up, "I admire the practice you use on your land, can you use it on mine?" What are you (renter) most proud of about the way the farmland you own is cared for?
- Respond to negativity with "Conservation is an opportunity—it's not a negative thing." If you are going to have a long-term relationship with the renter, it is to the renter's benefit to build soil health, since they will have less fertilizer and soil washing away.
- Just start the conversation about soil health. As a landowner I want to approach this like owning a car. If I don't take care of my car, it will wear out. I've been thinking about my farmland and how I would like it cared for. Here is what is important to me..... I've also like to think about how it could be even better cared for. (or phrase as appropriate to circumstance). One (or more) thing I've heard about is
- The goal is to help the renter be proud of taking good care of one's land.
- Recognize these may be additional steps that may entail time and at least initial additional costs. "What would you need from me to take these additional steps, or here is what I am offering?" Some things farmers get reimbursed, some things not. Find out what that might be and negotiate on it. Perhaps offer to split the cost-share that is the farmers responsibility.

Why should the renter pay for soil improvements? A renter of a house doesn't pay for a new roof, the home owner does. Answer: The renter may be getting the benefits of government farm programs like CSP, crop insurance and EQIP, so at the least should split the cost of putting in place practices that fall under such programs, etc.

Words to Use

If "cover crops" doesn't resonate, try bringing up winter rye (or a specific species combination) rather than the more general term.

Words Not to Use

You are doing it wrong. Tolerable soil loss or T-value. It's all about economics.

Farmer (renter) interview 2017

Name: _____

Date met or called: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

- 1) Experience growing vegetables? Raising livestock? Farming?
- 2) 5-year vision for growing / raising / cover crops/ organic production?
- 3) Have you developed a goal for your farming and in relation to this land? If so who has participated in creating that goal?
- 4) What you have been thinking about what it would take for you to make this kind of transition?
- 5) Will you need water or fencing?
- 6) Will you need a tractor, disc, other tillage? Or, pay for tractor work?
- 7) Need housing?
- 8) We expect organic production -- need organic certification?
- 9) Plan for 2018 growing season? When work soil? Types of vegetables?
- 10) Want 1-year lease? Multi-year lease?
- 11) Planning for tool shelter or green house for starting plants or cleaning station?
- 12) Need electricity / storage for cooling veggies?
- 13) What is your marketing approach?
- 14) Have you done enterprise planning, investigation, budgeting and understanding one's limitations?

Tips for Approaching Courageous Conversations

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February 2018

Background

Initiating or shifting conversations about farmland management can be challenging for any number of reasons for both farmland owners and tenants. However, effective communication between a landowner and tenant is essential to creating a lease agreement that meets the needs of both parties and to supporting a positive, ongoing relationship. Key to effective communication is a willingness to engage in conversations that might be uncomfortable, but you know are necessary to realize the outcomes that are important to you. This is why they are often called “courageous” conversations – they require us to choose that something (e.g., land stewardship) is more important to us than fear or discomfort. The good news is that engaging in courageous conversations is a skill everyone can develop and no one ever masters – so we’re all just doing the best that we can.

PREPARATION TIPS

- Consider your context
 - Have you identified your values and desired outcomes in relation to your farmland?
 - What is your current relationship with the tenant? Do you have a verbal or written lease?
 - Do you know the tenant’s land management practices on your farmland?
 - What is your current level of knowledge regarding agricultural terms and concepts and regenerative practices? Do you know where to look for more information?
- Know where you want to go – What are your values and vision for your farmland?
 - Many tools exist to assist with clarifying your short and long-term goals for your farmland; be sure to include all owners in arriving at a shared vision for the farmland – this may involve a separate or parallel series of conversations
- Start with the first step
 - Moving from farmland vision to reality will take time and ongoing conversations between landowner and tenant or potential tenant
 - Your first step will depend on your context, but will no doubt be followed by more steps. Consider what your purpose for a first or renewed conversation will be. The next conversation will be informed by the outcomes of the first conversation. The path from vision to reality is never a straight line.
 - Create a welcoming environment for a first conversation. Suggestions: meet in-person, enjoy some food or coffee/tea together, avoid intoxicating substances, pay attention to your body language and try to keep it comfortable and engaged (for typical U.S. culture, examples include: face the other person, make occasional eye contact, avoid slouching over, lean in slightly)
 - Share your purpose for the conversation when you make the invitation (an example from a non-farming landowner: *“George, I’d like to invite you over for some coffee and conversation. We’ve never really talked too much and I’d like for us to get to know each other better and to understand how things are going for you on the farm. Is there a good time this week for you to stop by the house?”*)

CONVERSATION TIPS

- **Maintain self-awareness** – Pay attention to your internal reactions and be intentional about your external responses (verbal and nonverbal). Also be aware of the impact of your responses on the other person(s) in the conversation.
- **Reinforce the positive** – If there are things your tenant does for the farmland or your family that you appreciate, tell her/him. People are more likely to remain engaged when they feel seen and valued.
- **Seek first to understand** – Be curious (rather than making assumptions) about your tenant's situation and perspective. Try your best to ask questions without an intent to change or shame the other person.
- **Actively listen** – Avoid interrupting the other person. Repeat back what you heard to confirm understanding. Really pay attention to what they are saying; this shows respect and may illuminate aspects of their perspective that can be a connecting point.
- **Speak your truth** – Your truth is valid and is an important component of a courageous conversation with your tenant/landlord. It is also important to recognize that the other person has their own truth, which is also an important component of a courageous conversation.
- **Celebrate participation** – Find opportunities to express gratitude for their time and perspectives.
- **Laughter is the best medicine** – As feels natural to you, laughing *at yourself* or *with others* can help ease tension.
- **Be willing to be uncomfortable** – Courageous conversations are named so because there is risk that things won't go as planned, conflict may surface - we may get anxious, start to feel out of control. Our instinct is usually to avoid and turn away from the unplanned event. If we can stay in our "stretch zone", relax and see what opportunities may arise, these "stretch" moments sometimes precede a breakthrough into new connections or possibilities.
- **Ensure a "Good" ending** – Even if this means accepting non-closure for the conversation, perhaps as part of an ongoing dialogue or because, together, you chose to pause. Make sure things feel complete to both parties. If not, and you are out of time, be sure to schedule another time to complete the conversation.

Goal Setting for Your Land

Start with your family:

Part of the family conversation should include a discussion of goals for the farm rental. Different family members are going to have different needs and desires. Whether your family makes decisions by consensus, or by a vote with input from all members, or by a decision of the senior generation; it is still important to understand the varying goals that family members may have.

Values are central:

What is most important to you that relates to how you want to manage your farmland? Such values might include continuing the family heritage of stewardship, conservation, community, financial stability, or passing the land on in better shape.

Some possible farm rental goals:

- Gain maximum dollar value from the property
- Gain enough dollar value from the property
- Provide for needs of retiring farmers & heirs
- Help a family member get started farming
- Help a non-related beginning farmer get started
- Build soil-health to steward the farm as an asset
- Minimize polluted runoff from the farm
- Bring Livestock back with more perennial cover for wildlife

Family goal-setting activity:

It can be hard to start up a family conversation about goals and have everyone comfortable about being honest. One fun and painless method to get started is to have people vote anonymously, using colored dot stickers.

Here's how:

At a family gathering --perhaps over the holidays -- print out these goals on sheets of paper. Put them someplace where people can get to them easily, perhaps on a bathroom wall, and give everyone a set of dot stickers. Ask your family members to "vote" by putting stickers on the goals of their choice.

Based on material from Farm Transitions Toolkit developed in 2013 by Land Stewardship Project, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, National Center for Appropriate Technology, and Farmers' Legal Action Group.