

...Power Team, from page 23

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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of a massive transfer of farmland ownership, particularly in the Midwest.

“When this huge land transfer is over, whoever comes out on top will decide the future of what agriculture and our landscape is going to be,” Erem says.

If current trends continue, that future is not looking good. Over 80% of the nation’s farmland is owned by people 55 or older, and roughly half of those people are 75 or older, according to a *National Public Radio* report. About half of Midwestern ag acres are owned by people who don’t farm it, and much of it is in parcels that range from 40 to 160 acres in size. Those parcels are being snatched up by larger operations, which often tear out the fences, bulldoze the homes and outbuildings, and make a former farmstead into just one more crop field.

Given this trend, Erem also concluded that there is no time to find the farmers first, and then link them with landowners. It has to be done in reverse. First, secure farmland and put in place restrictions that prevent it from becoming just one more industrial ag operation, then find a farmer who will farm it in a regenerative way. Erem concedes that’s a tall task, especially considering the price of farmland. And the clock is ticking.

There needs to be a way for making land affordable to beginning farmers who are ready to farm it today, not 10 years down the road. That requires removing farmland real estate speculation from the picture, she says.

Lowering the Price

SILT uses easements and land donations to protect agricultural acres and make them available to farmers who might otherwise not have access to land. An easement is a covenant attached to a deed that ensures in perpetuity land will be used in a certain way, no matter who owns or is renting it. In the case of the easements SILT uses, they make sure enrolled farms will not be future homes to, for example, tract housing, commercial development, chemical intensive cropping operations, or CAFOs. The SILT easements go a step further and also guarantee the farm will be managed utilizing regenerative practices. SILT staff monitor and enforce the easement; going to court if need be.

When landowners choose to attach such restrictions to their deed, it tends to lower

their farm’s dollar value by as much as 40%. When they sell it, this discount can give new farmers a chance to buy land without competing with housing developers or conventional commodity farmers on price.

SILT also accepts donations of farms that have easements. Once an operation is donated, the organization rents it to a farmer utilizing a long-term lease which has a discounted rate based on how much the land’s value has been reduced by the independently appraised easement. With decades of looming mortgage interest out of the picture, the beginning farmers on SILT-owned farms can plow capital into their operations. They won’t ever own the land, but they can rent-



Andy and Betsy Boone, shown with their daughter, Milly (they also have a son, Paden), on Driftless Hills Farm, which they rent from SILT. They will never own the farm. “It doesn’t bother me in the least, honestly,” says Andy of the fact that they will be lifelong renters. (LSP Photo)

to-own the house and outbuildings without paying interest or ponying up a hefty down payment, allowing them to build equity in the long term. Meanwhile, the former landowners garner significant tax breaks, as well as peace of mind that they’ve helped launch the next generation of farmers.

Whether the farm is sold outright at the discounted price or donated to SILT, the organization will make sure whoever works those acres agrees to utilize a broad range of sustainable, regenerative methods: diverse rotations, pasture-based livestock production, and, in general, systems that build soil health, for example. They must also have a third-party certification put in place through programs such as USDA Certified Organic, Certified Naturally Grown, Food Alliance Approved, Animal Welfare Approved, or Certified Biodynamic.

Conservation easements are nothing new — several organizations around the country utilize them to protect natural habitat on

land. But SILT’s use of easements may be one of the only examples in the Midwest of such a deed restriction being applied to working farmland that may not otherwise have an outstanding natural feature, like a wetland or a native prairie. It’s a recognition that sustainable farming practices can benefit the ecosystem, as well as the community.

Erem says finding landowners willing to lower the value of their farms by up to 40% is not as difficult as one might think.

“Is it a needle in a haystack? Absolutely. But, I’m telling you they are there,” she says. Interested landowners generally approach SILT with lots of questions. Each situation is unique, and the process of protecting a farm can take two years or longer, based on the landowner’s needs.

“You want to sit with the idea for a while, because this is not something you get to take back,” says Erem. “We really encourage landowners to take their time, to talk to the people they need to talk to, always to get the advice of their professionals. Because nobody likes a surprise, and nobody wants regret.”

SILT sees education as part of its mission, and produces resources (see sidebar, page 26) for landowners seeking information about what sustainable practices are viable on working farmland. Erem says it’s important to remind people that places like Iowa can produce more than corn and soybeans, and that there’s a market for locally produced, direct-to-consumer food or specialty crops.

Since it was launched five years ago, SILT has enrolled nine farms for a total of 935 acres. They range in size from 22 to 170 acres and are located across Iowa. SILT uses existing resources such as the Land Stewardship Project’s Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse (see page 27) to recruit farmers for parcels that need them. The beginning farmers currently running the operations represent a range of enterprises: grass-based livestock, small-scale vegetables, and organic grain, for example.

The Ownership Myth

As they approached their 70s a few years ago, Lyle and Sue Luzum started thinking about the future of their farm. They had been working the land since buying it from Lyle’s parents in 1979, and their daughter, Stephanie, doesn’t want to farm.

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Lyle put a lot of thought into the fact that he wanted to give a beginning, stewardship-minded farmer a chance. The farm is in the Driftless Region and is within a foot of being the highest point in Winneshiek County; to say the least, it's prone to erosion. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, Lyle's father put in contour strips and two-and-a-half miles of terraces. Lyle and Sue had always made sure the farm had a diverse, soil-building mix of row crops, small grains, and hay. They went no-till and certified it organic.

"We realized very quickly that if this farm goes to somebody who doesn't care about those things, those things will be quickly erased," says Lyle. "There's a lot of conservation history that we didn't want to see just torn up and put into corn and soybeans or a big CAFO."

But this isn't just about preserving a long-running legacy. Over the years, the Luzums had direct-marketed pasture-raised lamb and got involved in the local food movement. Through that experience, they saw potential for creative, hardworking beginning farmers to make a go of it financially on a relatively small farm like theirs.

Lyle is also motivated by the idea that he doesn't need to go to his grave knowing he sold the farm for the highest price. And that "highest price" can be, well, quite high. The Luzum farm, which has extensive outbuildings and other infrastructure, has been valued at about \$5,000-per-acre, putting the price tag for the entire operation in the \$1 million territory. Lyle finds that astounding — and a little bit ridiculous.

"It's a good farm, but it's not a \$5,000-an-acre farm," he says. "There's just something that doesn't feel morally right about me being the one that cashes in, when my ancestors worked their butts off to pass it on. There's nothing special about me — I just happened to be here at this moment."

Fortunately, the Luzums' daughter doesn't feel she's entitled to inherit a windfall either. So, in 2017 Lyle and Sue donated the farm to SILT and eventually moved to Decorah. The organization put the word out it was looking for farmers to rent it.

Regenerative Renting

Andy Boone, 34, grew up in Des Moines, and Betsy, 46, in Utah — they met in northern California where they both gained experience raising livestock on pasture. When

the Luzum farm became available, they were farming a few acres in southern Iowa and felt they needed more land to create a viable livestock enterprise and pursue direct marketing on a larger scale.

They learned about the Luzum farm through Practical Farmers of Iowa, and began the intense, months-long application process in the winter of 2018. It required a business plan with three years of cash flow projections. They also had to answer essay questions about why they wanted to farm and how they would handle everything from marketing and diversification...to failure.

"We spent like three weeks every night as soon as the kids went to bed, writing that stuff out and going through it," recalls Betsy.

The Boones were interviewed by members of the SILT Farmer Committee, which consists of farmer-members of the organization's board, as well as advisers. In the spring of 2018, their application was accepted, and by late fall they had moved onto the farm.

Last year was the Boones' first growing season on Driftless Hills Farm. Part of their attraction to the land is that local consumer markets for pastured meat are relatively accessible. They sell in the Decorah area and to a farmers' market in Minneapolis. The Boones have access to 70 acres of the farm — the rest is enrolled in a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) setaside contract that's three years into a 15-year lease. Betsy and Andy say not being able to farm all 170 acres allows them to grow into the operation; once the CRP contract expires, they may be ready to raise more livestock and expand. Besides being certified organic, the Boone operation is Animal Welfare Approved. In addition, their sheep enterprise is Certified Grassfed.

The beginning farmers are in the midst of a three-year probationary lease during which they need to show they are utilizing regenerative practices and are able to keep up on paying the discounted rent to SILT. After that trial period, a 20-year lease can be signed and they can start the rent-to-own arrangement on the house and outbuildings. In Iowa, 20 years is the longest lease period allowed, but it can be renewed in perpetuity. The Boones' children — they have a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter — can inherit the lease if they choose to farm.

An added bonus to the arrangement is that the Luzums also donated their machin-

Give it a Listen

On episode 243 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, retired farmer Lyle Luzum and beginning farmer Andy Boone describe how letting go of the "ownership myth" can benefit agriculture and local communities: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/1304.

ery. This has not only saved the Boones money, but it's giving them a chance to try different enterprises and decide what equipment they will need in the long-term. For example, with Lyle's help, they recently raised and harvested small grains, something the Boones hadn't considered doing before.

In order for an arrangement like this to work, it's not only the retiring farmer who must possess an unconventional view of land ownership. The Boones will never own the soil that Driftless Hills sits on. They say that's fine. They have heard farmers like Missouri grazier and author Greg Judy speak about the benefits of never owning land, but rather focusing on managing the enterprise that it is home to.

"It doesn't bother me in the least, honestly," says Andy of the fact that they will be lifelong renters. Hanging in the house on Driftless Hills Farm are plaques honoring the Luzum conservation legacy. The Boones say that's humbling, and allows them to take the long view of stewarding this land.

"I want to do well, just in general. Because of the land trust, because of the Luzum family, and just because that's the way we've always farmed in a regenerative way," says Andy as he walks past the plaques and out of the house on his way to check the grazing paddocks. "Lyle's dad was into soil conservation before it was really a thing, you know? And that feels really cool to me." □



"To think you own it is folly — you don't own it," says retired farmer Lyle Luzum of the way he views farmland. (LSP Photo)

The Dirt on SILT

For more information on the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust and its new publication, "An Iowa Landowners Guide to Sustainable Food Crops," see <https://silt.org> or call 319-800-8108.

Farm Transition Tools

The Land Stewardship Project has developed numerous resources to help retiring farmers and beginning farmers with transitions to the next generation. Check them out at www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmtransitiontools. On that web page, you will also find information on the Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit, which provides an incentive to sell or rent land or other agricultural assets—machinery, buildings, facilities, livestock, etc.—to a beginning farmer. There is also a tax credit available for beginning farmers who participate in a financial management program like Farm Beginnings.

For more information on the Land Stewardship Project's farm transition work, contact Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

Is Farming in Your Future?

The desire to farm is powerful—sparked by love of food, the land, community, entrepreneurship, and more. But it is a complicated undertaking, and the list of questions to answer before diving in is long. If you are dreaming of farming and puzzled about how to get started, the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Dreams workshop is for you. Farm Dreams is a four-hour workshop designed to help people clarify what motivates them to farm, get their vision on paper, inventory their strengths and training needs, and get perspective from an experienced farmer. It's a good precursor to LSP's Farm Beginnings course (see page 32).

Farm Dreams participants will:

- Assess their resources, skills, and motivations for farming.
- Learn about important things to consider when starting to farm.
- Write down their farm vision.
- Develop an educational plan.
- Learn about training opportunities and support networks.
- Talk to an experienced farmer about their path into farming.

Farm Dreams classes are held periodically throughout the year in the Minnesota-Wisconsin region. For dates and to register for the class, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmdreams, or contact LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □



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. For the latest listings, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/seekingfarmersseekinglandclearinghouse.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Aaron Curry is seeking to purchase a total of 6 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: Aaron Curry, 952-607-6953, nougan@gmail.com.

◆ Peter Yang is seeking to purchase 1-2 acres of farmland within **30-40 minutes of Saint Paul, Minn.** Contact: Peter Yang, 651-925-9700, plyyang8@gmail.com.

◆ Caitlyn Bell is seeking to purchase 25+ acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: Caitlyn Bell, 608-201-3377, caitlynshannanbell@gmail.com.

◆ Alejandra Sanchez is seeking to rent 10 acres of farmland within **one hour of Minnesota's Twin Cities**. Contact: Alejandra Sanchez, 510-504-5721, awoolenforrest@gmail.com.

◆ Levana Little is seeking to rent 1-3 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact:

Levana Little, 612-393-7249, l.m.mcneilly@gmail.com.

◆ Kahlyn Keilty-Lucas is seeking to purchase 5 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: 612-987-1038, kahlynkl@gmail.com.

◆ Eric Berge is seeking to purchase at least 5 acres of tillable farmland in *Minnesota or Wisconsin*. Contact: Eric Berge, 651-252-9661, rric.berge28@gmail.com.

◆ George Walker is seeking to purchase 80+/- acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: George Walker, 715-821-6775, george.g.walker@outlook.com.

◆ Shoua Lee is seeking to purchase 2-3 acres of farmland **within one hour of Minnesota's Twin Cities**. Contact: Shoua Lee, 651-230-9917, sualis21@gmail.com.

Farmland Available

◆ Valerie Haugen has for rent 10 acres of

farmland in *Minnesota's Scott County (near Lakeville)*. Contact: Brandon, 651-414-1301, brandonhaugen@gmail.com.

◆ Ed Lysne has for rent up to 5 acres of farmland in *Minnesota's Rice County, south of the Twin Cities*. Contact: Ed Lysne, 612-790-7873, edriclysne@gmail.com.

◆ Gordon Simon has for sale 5 to 53 acres of farmland in *western Wisconsin's Chippewa County*. Contact: Gordon Simon, 715-828-4698, gordysi@icloud.com.

◆ Patrick Lang has for sale 8.8 acres of farmland in *western Wisconsin's Dunn County*. Contact: Patrick Lang, 715-316-9068, hexagonprojectsfarm@gmail.com.

◆ Lori Cox has for rent, starting in 2021, a 10-acre u-pick fruit business in *Minnesota's Carver County*. Contact: Lori Cox, 425-241-2515, rootsreturn@gmail.com.