DEVELOPING & STRENGTHENING FARM LINK PROGRAMS

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS AND ADVOCATES

Land For Good

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cover photo: Janet and Jay (left), owners of Fair Winds Farm, are working on a farm transfer plan with Caitlin (right) and her husband, Jesse, of Wild Carrot Farm in Brattleboro VT.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. WHY THIS GUIDE FOR FARM LINK PROGRAMS?

In response to the urgent need to address farm and ranch access and transfer challenges, farm link programs have proliferated across our nation. As of 2018, there were fifty-plus farm link programs in the U.S. What—and how—are they doing? What makes some of them successful while others struggle or fail? Program developers and practitioners ardently believe in the purposes of their program, and the urgency of the challenges faced by those they serve. Some manage outstanding and creative programming. Yet many find it hard to sustain their activities and demonstrate accomplishments. Observers such as researchers, funders and policymakers express skepticism about such programs even as they agree on the need.

The purpose of this guide is to help develop and strengthen farm link programs in the U.S. It will be useful for existing programs as well as for groups planning or hoping to start farm link services. The material for this guide was largely gathered from the combined experience of three dozen farm link practitioners who gathered for a two-day national farm link clinic in 2019. It is augmented by the contributions of professionals and researchers with expertise in land access, farm transfer and farm link programs.

While the main intent of this guide is to help program practitioners, another purpose is as a tool to advocate for farm link programs—to help explain and champion them to funders, researchers, policymakers, potential "customers" and the public.

The premises for this guide are:

▶ Farm link services are needed;

▶ Farm link programs are not well understood; and

▶ Farm link programs can improve performance.

This guide shows the range of services and activities conducted by farm link programs. It focuses on what works. It also lays out the challenges and struggles faced by farm link staff. It lifts up successful examples, but it is not a "best practice" guide. "Best practice" usually means a method or procedure that is seen as "superior," "preferred," or the "standard." Farm link programs are far too varied to point to one best practice. As a whole, these programs should not be held to any particular description or standard. Furthermore, they are all still evolving.

In this guide you will learn about:

▶ What farm link programs are and do

▶ Web-based posting services

▶ Program metrics and evaluation

▶ Program branding, marketing, and outreach

▶ Program staffing and funding

✔ EXAMPLES *and* ❷ GUIDING QUESTIONS

The guide will highlight successful **examples** while also showing the range of possibilities. These examples are not exhaustive; there are many others.

Guiding Questions are salted throughout the guide. They are intended to spur thinking and dialogue about your program and/or organizational development, and help shape strategic planning. They may also help with problem identification and problem solving in your farm link program, whether it is well established or a gleam in your eye.

B. LAND FOR GOOD & THE NATIONAL FARM LINK CLINIC

Land For Good is a New England nonprofit organization that specializes in farm access, tenure and transfer. LFG staff work on the ground with farm seekers, landowners, and transitioning farm families. They produce educational

materials, conduct dozens of workshops, presentations and mixers annually, train service providers, and advocate for policies that support farm access and transfer in New England and nationally. With **New England Farm Link Collaborative** partners, LFG administers the **New England Farmland Finder** property posting website.

As a developer, observer and promoter of farm access, transfer and linking programs since 2004, LFG saw a need and opportunity to bring farm link programs together. Researchers agree. "Recent research highlights that deeper understanding is needed about the various linking programs' substantial experience, their effectiveness and best practices."[1] As a component of its third Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant[2], LFG convened the first national farm link clinic in St. Louis, Missouri in April, 2019. Thirty-five participants from 23 states completed a pre-event online survey that helped set the discussion points for the two days together. At the event, participants shared their experiences, practices, technologies, challenges and aspirations—many of which are collected in this guide.

Complementing the information and contributions provided by the farm link clinic participants are research and analyses by academics (see **Bibliography**, p. 58). The guide's lead author brings three decades of farm link program observation and practice.

Farm link programs are doing amazing things—often on a shoestring. All are responding to an urgent unmet need with a wide range of activities. The data and stories are striking, revealing and ultimately affirming of their value and accomplishments.

> *Contemporary conditions have created enormous, unprecedented challenges to farm access and transfer.*

1   Valliant, Julia C.D., K.Z. Ruhf, K.D. Gibson, J.R. Brooks and J.R. Farmer. 2019. Fostering farm transfers from farm owners to unrelated, new farmers: A qualitative assessment of farm link services. Land Use Policy 86(2019) 438-447.

2   USDA BFRDP award # 2018-70017-28531.

II. WHAT ARE FARM LINK PROGRAMS?

A. HISTORY, BACKGROUND AND NEED

In past generations, most U.S. farmers[3] simply passed their farms[4] to their children, typically the eldest son. The vast majority of "next generation" farmers grew up on farms and took them over from their parents. Supplemental land was rented to and/or from neighboring farmers. Farming was a largely inherited occupation; intergenerational transfer is still a main route into farming.

However, contemporary conditions have created enormous, unprecedented challenges to farm access and transfer. Seniors are holding onto the reins much longer than in the past, pushing off transfer. Fewer members of the next generation are choosing to stay on or go back to the farm. Without successors, older farmers avoid planning for their exit, leaving their non-farming heirs to rent or sell the land—sometimes to the expanding neighboring farm. Or the land is sold to development, divided into less agriculturally viable parcels or simply abandoned. Recent research by American Farmland Trust revealed greater loss of land than previously estimated— nearly 31 million acres between 1992 and 2012.[5] These "default" options result in consolidation of farms and farm wealth, loss of farmland, and diminished farming opportunity for those who want to farm.

3   In this guide, "farmers" includes both farmers and ranchers, and includes all agricultural production.

4   In this guide, "farm" includes both farms and ranches. When not otherwise described, "farm" may mean the business operation and/or the real estate. In succession and transfer, the distinction could be significant. Programs must be clear on use of terms.

5   American Farmland Trust. 2018. **Farms Under Threat: The State of America's Farmland**.

On the flip side, a surge in interest in food and farming has produced a large cohort of new farmers coming from non-farming backgrounds. They don't have a farm to inherit. Farm access is a challenge for the next generation on the farm too; inadequate succession planning often derails their aspirations. Access to land has been identified as the main challenge for new and beginning farmers. Access means land that is available, affordable, appropriate, secure and findable. Land prices make it prohibitive for most entering producers to purchase— and in many locations, even to rent—farms or land to farm. Tenancy is most often insecure. Furthermore, farms and farmland are, simply put, hard to find.

How farms are acquired and transferred impacts the future of U.S. agriculture. Farm start-up and transfer (referred to as entry and exit by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)) are two of the most critical stages in a farm business. About three decades ago, foresighted farm advocates recognized that traditional methods of farm access and transfer were not sufficient to assure the continued vitality of family farms. Something needed to be done to help both entering and exiting farmers.

PROGRAMS BEGIN

The first farm link programs were developed in the early 1990s. Their initial purpose was to help retiring farmers without a family successor find someone to take over their operation. At that time, the idea was for transitioning farmers to describe their "offer." Lists (or selections from them) of such offers and lists of young farmers looking to get onto a farm were exchanged. The parties would contact each other and a "match" was presumed to be made. While the focus was on the retiring farmer, programs typically reported up to ten times as many seekers as exiting farmers. Data on actual transactions was not collected.

PROGRAMS EXPAND

Today, "connecting" farm seekers and farm holders is more complex than the exchange of names. Experienced practitioners understand that multiple interventions and supports are essential to assure that seekers successfully get onto farms, and that farms are successfully transferred. As understanding of the challenges around farm access and transfer has become more sophisticated, practitioners realize that lists and name exchanges may be valuable tools but not sufficient as stand-alone solutions. New farm link programs have sprung up, and many do much more than manage property and seeker lists. They have modernized and expanded to embrace a range of purposes, services and beneficiaries. Online databases and applications replaced paper versions. Target audiences also have broadened.

Farmers without identified successors still need help to recruit a transferee. But for many farm link programs, customer emphasis has shifted to the farm seeker. Seekers may desire to become the successor of a retiring farmer, but many are looking to establish or expand their own operation either on previously farmed or "raw" land. Thus the land holder audience has expanded beyond retiring farmers to include various categories of non-farming landowners such as farm inheritors, owners of "farmable" properties, institutions and public entities. Likewise, the seeker audience has expanded beyond just new and young farmers. As mentioned above, one significant trend is the surge in new farmers who do not come from farms; they are an important farm link program audience. Additional information on farm link program audiences is provided in **Section III**.

MEETING AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

There is no standard definition of a farm link program. What each program does is self-declared. All start from the premise that "connecting" farmers and landowners is a major bottleneck in sustaining farms and fostering farming opportunities. Most have some kind of web-based property posting tool. Some are just a classified-type listing provided by an organization that does other related activities such as farmer training. Some "link" farmers with employment, apprenticeships, equipment and advice. Some provide educational programming. Some are large organizations with a full suite of farmer

and landowner services. Some function within a collaborative network of service providers. Budgets range from a few thousand to over a million dollars. (See more on budgets and funding in **Section VIII**.)

As participants in the national clinic observed, this variety is rich and exciting. At the same time, it leads to misunderstandings, misrepresentations and mismatched expectations. The most common example of this is the focus on the "number of matches" as a key or sole measure of success, where a "match" is elusively defined and measured. Such "matches" are clearly important. However, observers often conflate the usefulness of the online listing tool with achieving successful farm access or transfers which involve multiple steps and parties over time.

Meeting Expectations…

"Land matches resulting from [link programs] are hard to count." *(Fraas)*

"Program success is difficult to measure." *(Liberty Prairie)*

"… only 7% of seeker-users 'secured land' through the programs' listing services." *(Pillen and Hinrichs)[6]*

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6   See Bibliography for sources of the phrases in this list.

Moreover, because "matches" can be difficult to verify, program staff scramble to produce "match" numbers, when in fact those numbers may not be the most meaningful consideration. More to follow on metrics (see **Section VI**).

If a narrow understanding of farm link programs is a problem, a too-broad understanding also can lead to mismatched expectations. Various studies on this topic imply that farm link programs: support sustainable succession; act as a resources broker; preserve farmland;

help farmers retire with financial security; assist new farmers with start-up costs; encourage farm transfers; and find appropriate farmland arrangements, for example. Furthermore, since programs vary so much, applying any one critique or standard measurement works to undermine the multiple benefits provided by a specific program. Often, despite a broad farm link mission, staff and critics alike will devolve a program's metrics into the number of site users or "matches" as a primary measure of success.

Despite the existence of self-identified farm link programs since the early 1990s, broad attention to the issues that spurred them is relatively recent. Along with this increasing attention has come a broad range of new programming identified as land access and/or farm transfer programs (not specifically "farm link"). All do important work. In some ways it doesn't matter what they're called. This guide validates what farm link programs do, clarifies what they don't do, and points out how terminology, expectations and branding *do* matter. And, importantly, that farm link programs address a unique and urgently needed service niche.

B. "LINK" AND OTHER TERMS

What's in a name? Language does matter. Clear and understandable wording helps clarify goals and activities, communicate with others, plan effectively and evaluate meaningfully. It's important for farm link programs to distinguish what they do—and don't do. And it's important to use terms that target audiences and other stakeholders understand.

Descriptive terms commonly used by farm link programs are *link, connect* and *match*. According to standard dictionary definitions:

▸ **Link**: (v) to make or form a connection; (n) a relationship between two things or situations.

▸ **Connect**: (v) to bring together or into contact; to join, unite, bind or fasten together; to link.

▶ *Match*: (v) to suit or fit one thing to another; (n) two or more persons or things that go together.

That's interesting; but how are these similar terms differentiated and operationalized in farm link programs? In other words, how are they used on the ground and what do they mean in context? Drawing from the survey completed by participants in the national farm link clinic, here are some examples of how farm link programs define "link." (NOTE: this guide will propose definitions; see **Section III**.)

> **Example definitions of "link"**
> *(Direct quotes from the link clinic survey)*
>
> ▶ Farmer and landowner make contact with each other
>
> ▶ Any exploration of a deal between a landowner and seeker
>
> ▶ Forming an agreement
>
> ▶ When a land seeker and landowner talk
>
> ▶ Connecting farmers with land opportunities
>
> ▶ A place to start a conversation
>
> ▶ A farmer-landowner agreement
>
> ▶ Bringing two parties together
>
> ▶ Connection through a listing or event
>
> ▶ Introductions between parties
>
> ▶ Linking farmers to land, resources and assistance

You can see large variation in how programs think about their "links." For some, a link is an initial contact; for others it's a consummated deal. In the absence of one "industry standard," programs are free to define their linking activities in their own ways. However you define it, it is important to be clear about what your program means when using these terms, what your customers can expect (and should not expect), and what exactly you are counting when you evaluate and report.

As a farm link term, "match" presents similar variety. Clinic participants offered these example definitions:

> **Example definitions of "match"**
> *(Direct quotes from the link clinic survey)*
>
> ▶ Facilitated introduction and agreement development
>
> ▶ A connection between a landowner and farm seeker
>
> ▶ A signed lease or purchase agreement
>
> ▶ Same as link
>
> ▶ Farmer gains access to land
>
> ▶ Seeker and owner have similar interests; a good fit
>
> ▶ A farmer using a posted site
>
> ▶ Land or resource link
>
> ▶ Successful continuation of a farm business

Here, a match can be anything from giving a farmer a good referral to assuring the future of a farm operation. Again, you can define "match" as you wish, or not use the term. The point is to be as clear as possible about what you mean.

One big reason for clarity is in regard to metrics and evaluation. In response to the survey question to farm link clinic participants about numbers of links or matches completed per year, the answers ranged from 2 to 3,000. Responses included "not sure," "not officially counted" and "many links, not many matches." No wonder outcomes can seem obscure!

PROGRAM, SERVICE, METHOD OR TOOL?

This may seem like getting into deep weeds. But it might be useful to consider the following distinctions as you think about your farm link work. One reason to parse these terms is to mitigate false expectations–for example equating a tool with a program. A farm property database (tool) is not a program. It does not in itself result in successful land access or transfers, nor should it be expected to.

▶ **Tool**: *a device that aides in accomplishing a task.* Most farm link programs use an online platform to manage a database of farm properties, and sometimes seekers as well.

▶ **Method**: *procedure or processes for attaining an objective.* One method farm link programs use to connect seekers and landowners is to sort through seeker and landowner lists or enable user searches for potential connections. Another method to accomplish the same objective is face-to-face mixers.

▶ **Service**: giving assistance or help; professional aid. Farm link services may include facilitating seeker-landowner conversations, one-on-one technical assistance, developing leases, assessing land, and/or curating an online property posting service.

▶ **Program**: *a set of [structured] activities.* A farm link program may consist of one activity such as a classified section of an e-newsletter, or a suite of activities including conducting educational events, producing resource materials and online toolboxes, and professional networking, just for example. A program can offer several services.

▶ **Organization**: *an organized body with a particular purpose.* Your farm link could be your entire organization, or a program within it. How does it fit with your organization's mission and its other programs?

▶ **Network**: *an interconnected system of groups.* We'll address how your farm link work fits into a larger network later in this guide (see **Section IX**). For now, consider where your services and programs fit in the larger picture. Who else is doing work that contributes to—and may be necessary for—successful outcomes for your beneficiaries? Several farm link clinic participants describe a network in which multiple organizations formally agree to deliver services related to farm access and transfer. Others work less formally via, for example, referrals and advisor team coordination.

A FEW MORE TERMS…

In case you haven't gotten your fill of terminology, here are a few more terms that come up in farm link programs.

▶ **Listing or posting?** Which is better to use to describe your database of properties and in some cases seekers? While "list" seems most obvious, some licensed real estate brokers point out that "listing" is a term associated with their industry, and should be used only when placing a property through Multiple Listing Service (MLS) and its representation by a licensed agent. Others choose to "post" properties. Some programs use "profiles" for seekers and/or properties.

▶ **Farm or farmland?** For your program, does "farm" (or ranch) include both entire farms (with infrastructure and housing) and undeveloped or "raw" land? Are "farm" and "farmland" interchangeable or different? If it matters to your audience, be clear and help your customers be clear too. (Some programs are called "land link"; they are synonymous with "farm link.")

▶ **Land or business?** When you post a property or opportunity, are you clear about what is being offered? Is it everything—business entity, land and related assets? Is the operation (business entity) for sale, while the farmer (or heirs) retains the real estate? Is the operation ending, with the land and facilities now available? These distinctions will matter to your audience.

▶ **Land access or land tenure?** *Tenure* means "to hold." In agriculture, it refers to the rights, rules and arrangements connected with using and controlling land. Ownership and tenancy are the basic land tenure options. *Land access* is about acquiring those rights and arrangements. Access to land addresses availability, appropriateness, affordability, security, and "findability"—one of the main reasons for farm link programs.

▶ **Succession, transfer or transition?** Service providers split hairs on these distinctions. Sometimes it's fine

to use the three terms interchangeably; with other audiences, more nuanced connotations matter. For some, succession means within the family. For others, succession refers to the social and management aspects while transfer applies to the legal and economic decisions involved in passing a farm between generations or owners. In organic agriculture, "transition" may refer to land that is in the process of being certified as organic. For example, the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) works on land transfers from exiting to beginning farmers. It also has a program to help landowners transition their land to organic. The most appropriate term may depend on how your beneficiaries and/or professional network use the terms.

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1   **What are the needs or gaps you are addressing? Write a needs statement.**

2   **Why does your organization want to do this work? What history got you to this point in your farm link endeavors?**

3   **What is your definition of a "link"? A "match"?**

   ▸ **If you have a program, what are your current definitions? How might you refine or improve them?**

   ▸ **If you are planning a program, what might be your clearest definitions?**

4   **What other words and terms are important for your program to define?**

   ▸ **What are YOUR definitions for those terms?**

   ▸ **Check out several farm link program websites. Are their terms clear?**

✓ EXAMPLES

▸ **The Land Connection's Classifieds** "is a listing service to help connect land seekers and landowners, as well as for farm businesses to post job openings at their operation and equipment for sale. We invite you to browse the listings to see what is currently available or submit a post of your own."

▸ **Colorado Land Link** "serves as a catalyst for convening conversations and resource development around the issues of land access and farm succession. Through fostering meaningful and long-lasting connections, we strive to support the vision and goals of the next generation of farmers and ranchers together with those of current or retiring producers and landowners. As part of these efforts, Colorado Land Link maintains a database to support potential matches between farmers and ranchers seeking land opportunities with landowners and retiring producers wanting to transitioning their land. We seek to find match opportunities that show strong potential and a shared agricultural vision between both parties. In addition to this matching service, Land Link serves as a resource clearinghouse for educational and training opportunities, technical resources and networking for technical assistance and support. The success of Colorado Land Link is not based solely on how many matches we make, but also on how many farmers and ranchers benefit from the tools and resources we provide along the way."

▸ **Iowa State University Beginning Farmer Center's Ag Link Program** "is a service to help preserve the family farm business by matching beginning farmers who do not own land, with retiring farmers who do not have heirs to continue the family farm business. Ag Link maintains a database of potential beginning farmers and landowners."

III. WHAT DO FARM LINK PROGRAMS DO?

A. TYPES OF SERVICES

In this section you will learn more about what farm link programs offer, along with considerations for program development and clarity. Farm link programs are exciting because they address the huge challenges related to farm access and transfer in a wide variety of ways. That makes for a big, juicy fruit basket of services. It also makes it a little harder to explain many different activities to program audiences, and to track outcomes.

To provide some organizing structure to this rich mix, we lay out a way of categorizing farm link program activities into three major types of services which are then further broken out.

Three Types of Farm Link Services	
CORE SERVICES	‣ **Posting** ‣ **Connecting** ‣ **Matching**
WRAP-AROUND SERVICES	‣ **Education** ‣ **Technical Assistance**
SUPPORTING SERVICES	

CORE SERVICES

All farm link programs offer some mix of core services, typically (but not always) based on managed online information about available farm properties. These core services are further broken into three main categories, based on terms as specifically defined in this guide.

POSTING

The posting service consists of a web-based managed list of available farms. It may also list seekers. The posting function ranges from an open-access classified section of an organization's newsletter or website to a platform where users register to post or view properties or profiles, and search property or seeker databases. *The goal is to publicize available farms and eager seekers.*

✔ **EXAMPLES**

‣ **Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance** has a simple web list of available farm properties in a blog format.

‣ **NJ Farm Link's online linking tool** has both a map view and a list view of available properties.

‣ On **California Farm Link's website**, users can search by county and also screen for housing availability.

‣ Practical Farmers of Iowa's online listing service, **findafarmer.net**, enables both owners and seekers to pin their location on a map, and share their story in a profile. Users may remain anonymous. They can search for owners or seekers based by location or other criteria and communicate using the site's messaging tool.

CONNECTING

The connecting service includes notifications to pre-sorted or screened seekers and/or landowners from a property (and sometimes seeker) database, based on compatibility criteria. A database manager may, for example, screen applications, determine potential compatibility and provide contact information to the selected parties. This function may also include seeker pre-screening or certification, and assisting landowners with their property description. *The goal is to inform seekers and owners about parties of interest.*

> #### ✔ EXAMPLES
>
> ▸ At **Colorado Land Link**, staff "will search [their] database of landseekers and update [owners] with the status of the search. Regardless of whether or not there is a match, [they] will begin sharing resources and opportunities with [owners] as they arise."

MATCHING

Matching is a facilitated transaction between a *specific* seeker and a *specific* owner. It occurs between parties who found one another via a farm link *posting* or were *connected* by a farm link program *or* via another method. Of the three, matching is by far the most labor-intensive and complex function. It can involve facilitated meetings, lease development, purchase and sale support, advisor coordination or unrelated transfer negotiation, for example. *The goal is to consummate an arrangement between identified parties.*

> #### ✔ EXAMPLES
>
> ▸ In addition to hosting a land linking portal, **California FarmLink** assists farmers and landholders in negotiating and developing equitable agreements.
>
> ▸ Renewing the Countryside's **Farmland Access Navigator service** helps farmers negotiate arrangements. RTC does not manage a property or seeker posting service.
>
> ▸ **Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm Link** primarily focuses on facilitating arrangements between retiring farmers and potential successors. Department staff offer "soup to nuts" support depending on the needs and requests of the parties, once an initial match is made.
>
> ▸ **PCC Farmland Trust's Farm to Farmer program** has both an online and in person component.
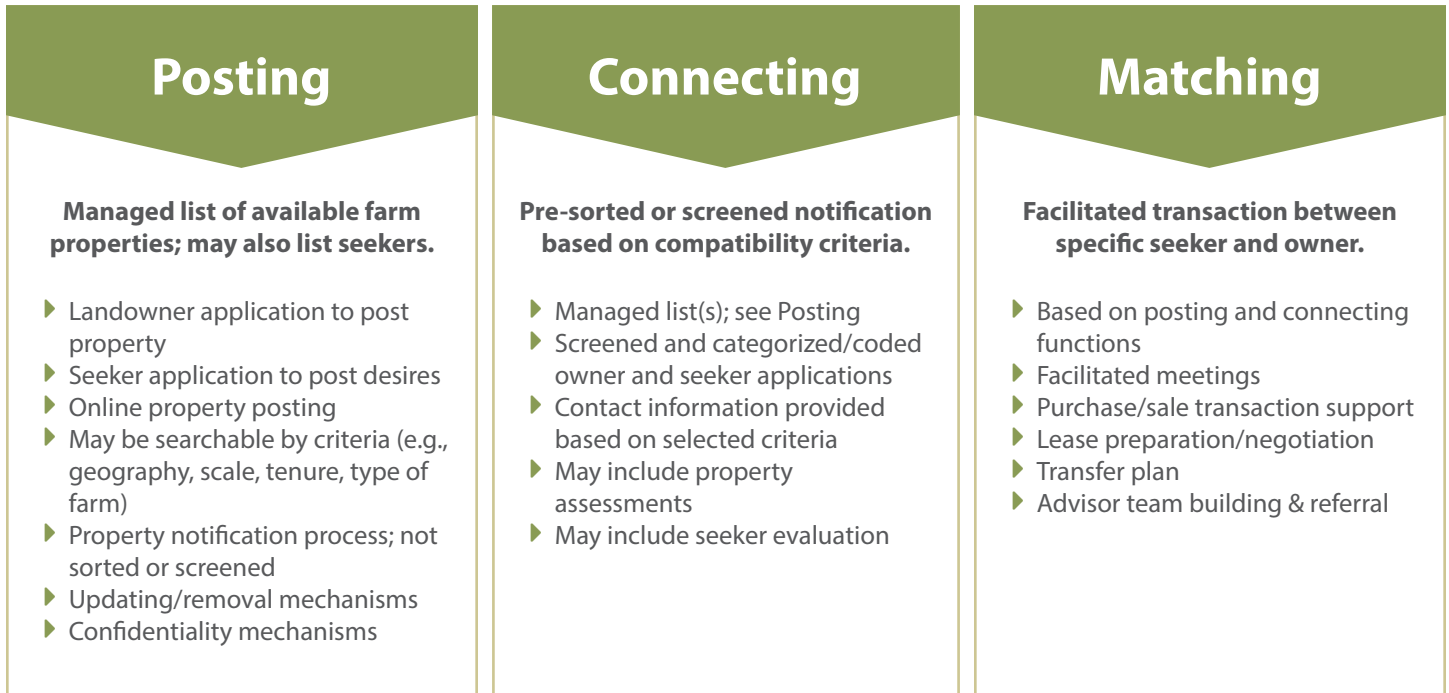
Some farm link programs only manage a posting service. Many offer posting and connecting. A farm link program may facilitate matches but not have an online property (and/or seeker) component. To further complicate matters, some organizations (including agencies, educational institutions, for-profit firms and private consultants) offer matching-type services but do not identify as "farm link."

FARM LINK SERVICES

What do farm link programs do? This draft chart sorts various functions and services that farm link programs mention. Most programs offer some version of posting, connecting and matching as core services. Many offer a few or many of the other services.

Posting

Managed list of available farm properties; may also list seekers.

▸ Landowner application to post property
▸ Seeker application to post desires
▸ Online property posting
▸ May be searchable by criteria (e.g., geography, scale, tenure, type of farm)
▸ Property notification process; not sorted or screened
▸ Updating/removal mechanisms
▸ Confidentiality mechanisms

Connecting

Pre-sorted or screened notification based on compatibility criteria.

▸ Managed list(s); see Posting
▸ Screened and categorized/coded owner and seeker applications
▸ Contact information provided based on selected criteria
▸ May include property assessments
▸ May include seeker evaluation

Matching

Facilitated transaction between specific seeker and owner.

▸ Based on posting and connecting functions
▸ Facilitated meetings
▸ Purchase/sale transaction support
▸ Lease preparation/negotiation
▸ Transfer plan
▸ Advisor team building & referral

WRAP-AROUND SERVICES

Services that build seeker and/or owner capacity around farm access or transfer.

▸ Tenure education; options information
▸ Acquisition planning, financial/strategic
▸ Financing
▸ Search plan; property assessment

▸ Succession/transfer planning assistance
▸ Landowner education, information
▸ Lease education
▸ Easements/other tools
▸ Successor recruitment
▸ Mixers

SUPPORTING SERVICES

Services not directly related to the farm acquisition or transfer process.

▸ New farmer training
▸ Business/viability skills/ planning; financial management
▸ Employment
▸ Mentoring/ apprenticeships
▸ Production systems/ practices

▸ Land use planning/ conservation/ preservation
▸ Other referral (advisors, equipment, etc.)
▸ Advocacy/policy
▸ Public education; food system awareness
▸ Legal support

WRAP-AROUND SERVICES

Wrap-around services are those services that *directly pertain* to farm access and transfer. They "wrap-around" the core posting, connecting and matching functions. These activities aim to educate, assist, and build the capacity of farm seekers, landowners and transitioning farmers to accomplish their farm access and transfer goals. Examples include landowner and seeker workshops, lease development assistance and property assessment.

✔ **EXAMPLES**

▸ **Connecticut FarmLink** offers free site assessments to landowners. The CT Department of Agriculture partners with Connecticut Farmland Trust; their employees and consultants determine what types of agriculture the land is best suited for. Based on the site visit, they offer suggestions for posting the property on FarmLink, features to consider in a lease or sale, and possible improvements that will increase the farm's potential. CT FarmLink also offers free site visits to farm seekers. With the landowner's permission, they visit properties of interest to evaluate the land and infrastructure suitability for the seeker's needs and goals.

SUPPORTING SERVICES

Some programs also offer supporting services which are *not directly related* to farm acquisition or transfer. Examples include beginning farmer training, business planning, and farmland protection. Note that most farm link programs also "connect" farmers with other resources (*not* directly related to farm acquisition or transfer) such as apprenticeships, equipment, and business consultants.

You'll find much more about core, wrap-around and supporting services below. Note that in some cases, all these services are delivered by a self-named farm link program that sits within an organization or agency. Sometimes "farm link" refers only to the core services,

while that organization or agency offers wrap-around and/or supporting services through other programs. Confusing, yes, but this matters for several reasons. Internally, it's important to be clear about staff roles, and inter-program boundaries and relationships. To the outside—especially beneficiaries and fellow service providers, it's essential to explain what you offer and who does what—your unique identity. Again, there's no one best way. It depends on your organization and goals.

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 **Which core services do you perform or want to perform?**

2 **What wrap-around services do you perform or want to perform?**

3 **What supporting services do you perform or want to perform?**

4 **How do your core, wrap-around and supporting services support or conflict with each other?**

✔ **EXAMPLES**

▸ **NJ Farm Link's Resources page** includes resources directly related to land access and others of broader interest to beginning farmers.

▸ **PCC Farmland Trust's Farm to Farmer program** offers a searchable list of resources and service providers.

▸ **New England Farmland Finder** offers a guide to farm link programs in the New England region and a linked list of additional resources for owners.

▸ **California FarmLink** is a certified Community Development Financial Institution that offers flexibly structured financing to farmers for operations, equipment and land, along with helping farmers build business skills.

B. FARM ACCESS AND TRANSFER: A FRAMEWORK

We know that farm access and transfer are complex processes. There's so much that farm seekers—especially beginning farmers—need to know and do to successfully achieve their land tenure goals. Similarly, transitioning farmers need a lot of support to accomplish their succession and transfer objectives. And, note that nearly ninety percent of farm landlords are not farmers.[7] This large cohort of non-farming landowners (referred to as non-operator landowners or non-operator landlords (NOLO) by USDA, depending on the context) needs more guidance than is typically available to them, too.

> *The schematic on the next page is one way to contextualize what you do (or hope to do).*

In various ways, farm link programs seek to help one or more of these audiences. You will find more about audiences below. The schematic on the next page is one way to contextualize what you do (or hope to do). This diagram posits three stages that farm seekers and farm owners go through:

1 **Prepare**: includes education, information gathering, situation assessment, financial readiness, planning.

2 **Find**: focuses on the property search, site assessment, and successor recruitment.

3 **Transact**: focuses on where the parties negotiate their agreement.

For each of these stages, there are several steps, methods and choices for each party to a transaction. You will see that a linking service is one method farmers can use when searching for a farm, and what owners use to find a buyer, tenant or successor (the "find" stage). As pointed out, farm link programs often offer other "find" methods and do important work in the prepare and transact stages.

7   Source: USDA 2014 Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land Survey

WHAT FARM LINK PROGRAMS ARE AND AREN'T

The broad conception of farm link programs allows for a lot of different understandings and activities about what they are and do. Below you will learn more about what programs actually do. The common denominator may only be "helping farm seekers and farm/land owners with farm access and transfer" through some kind of "connecting." Under this big umbrella, most but not all programs feature a property posting website. (More on this in **Section IV**). As mentioned above, some farm link programs help farmers find other resources too, such as employment, equipment, or business assistance. Some farm link programs focus more on educating than connecting. Farm link services could be part of a larger land access or beginning farmer training program. They could be attached to farm transfer or farmland protection programming.

There is no "best" or recommended approach. The important take-away is to be clear on what your programs and services are and are not. Farm link is not the same as farmland protection or farmer training. Or business planning. Or succession advising, although your farm link program may do some or all of this work too. This distinction is important because: a) your unique brand is important; b) you don't want to mislead or overpromise; c) you want to know and communicate your boundaries and limitations; and d) you want to find partners who do what you don't as part of any farm seeker's or landowner's support network.

FARM ACCESS AND TRANSFER: STAGES & METHODS

Accessing and transferring farms can be seen as a three-stage process. Each stage involves several steps, methods and choices for farm seekers and farm owners. This graphic helps both "sides" as well as service providers locate themselves in—and move through—the process.

Farm Seekers		Farm Owners	
New & Beginning Farmers	**Established Farmers**	**Transitioning Farmers**	**Non-Farmers**
1. PREPARE			
Learn about tenure options **Do needs assessment** **Establish goals** **Determine financial readiness** **Research financing** **Develop search plan**	**Do needs assessment** **Clarify search** **Research financing** **Develop search plan**	**Complete succession/ transfer plan** **Prepare offer statement** **Develop recruitment plan (if needed)**	**Complete visioning/ clarify goals** **Assess property** **Develop offer statement** **Develop search plan**
2. FIND			
Search for property ▸ Mixers/events ▸ Realtor ▸ Online ▸ Linking service ▸ Word of mouth ▸ Networks **Assess/evaluate**	**Search for property** ▸ Mixers/events ▸ Realtor ▸ Online ▸ Linking service ▸ Word of mouth ▸ Networks **Assess/evaluate**	**Recruit a successor** ▸ Mixers/events ▸ Linking service ▸ Word of mouth ▸ Networks **Find a tenant** ▸ Same as above **Market a sale** ▸ Same as above ▸ Realtor ▸ Online/publications	**Search for tenant or buyer** ▸ Mixers/events ▸ Realtor ▸ Linking service ▸ Word of mouth ▸ Networks ▸ Online/publications
3. TRANSACT			
Negotiate ▸ Purchase (incl. financing) ▸ Lease ▸ Employment ▸ Work-in succession	**Negotiate** ▸ Purchase (incl. financing) ▸ Lease ▸ Employment ▸ Work-in succession	**Select successor/ transferee** **Transfer assets and management over time** **Negotiate** ▸ Sale ▸ Lease/Lease-to-own	**Negotiate** ▸ Sale ▸ Lease/lease-to-own ▸ Employment (manager)

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 In this schematic, where do you see your program? Highlight areas where you now work or hope to work.

2 Are there things that you do related to farm access and transfer that are not on this chart? If so, what are they? Where do they belong on the chart?

3 How does this chart fit with your ideas about your work and program objectives?

4 Look at other programs. What do they do? Is it clear?

5 What does or will your program NOT do?

6 How do or will you communicate about your boundaries?

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ Georgia FarmLink's website has a **tab for farmland protection** that gives information about conservation easements and the Conservation Use Valuation Assessment (CUVA), a ten-year temporary protection tool.

▸ Northeast Illinois FarmLink has a **tab for events**.

▸ The New England Farm Link Collaborative has **a program guide** to services offered by the partners.

C. MISSION AND GOALS

Goal clarity is a challenge for many farm link programs. This is partially because their aspirations often are bigger than their budgets and/or staff expertise. It's also because organizations see the huge need and complexity of the issues. They observe gaps in services, from farm seeker education to lease development, from landowner support to succession advising. It's hard not to try to fill all the gaps.

This guide won't parse vision, mission, goals and objectives. That said, it is important to be clear about your purpose(s) and intentions. Sometimes it helps to think of the oft-used metaphor of Russian nesting dolls—that set of wooden figures of decreasing size placed one inside another. Are your farm link mission and goals for the whole organization? Perhaps your farm link program is a component of an organization that does other things. Your program will have its own goals and objectives. Within that, your online database service will have its own narrower objectives. A network comprised of multiple partner organizations might have a mission statement for its collaborative farm link-type activities. As part of that network, your organization or program goal statement is separate but related.

Again, there's no "best practice" goal statement. What's best is what most accurately conveys what you do. Here is a theoretical example:

The mission *of the Tri-state Farmer Support Organization is to help new farmers succeed in farming. We provide production training, business technical assistance, and land access support. The* goals *of our Tri-state Farm Link Program are to educate new farmers about their land access options, help them find suitable properties, and support their land transactions. The* objective *of our Find-My-Farm online property posting service is to make available farm properties known to our new farmers.*

Below you will find real-life examples of mission or goal statements from participants in the national farm link clinic. You can see they range in scope, specificity and clarity.

MISSION/GOAL STATEMENTS

Examples (direct quotes) from the farm link clinic survey

‣ Help new farmers navigate the process of finding affordable land to farm

‣ Ensure the availability of farmland … for farmers of today and tomorrow

‣ A clearinghouse for transition between generations of landowners to keep land in production

‣ Enable new and expanding farmers to connect with land opportunities

‣ Help [seekers] and landowners efficiently connect with each other and to also access resources and events that will increase the odds of working out a good relationship once a good match has been found

‣ Provide land matching and business support services

‣ A clearinghouse for the transition between landowner generations to keep land in production

‣ Connect farmers and landowners and provide resources to develop… farm leases

‣ Connect farmers with land and resources

‣ Work directly with farm seekers to improve their chances for success, and with landowners and retiring farmers searching for next generation farmers to continue our state's farming legacy

❷ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 **Which example mission/goal statements do you find effective? Why?**

2 **What is your program mission or goal? Write your mission/goal statement.**

3 **What would a "nesting doll" diagram of your farm link look like?**

D. SCALE AND GEOGRAPHY

Farm link programs vary on the geographic area they cover. Among the national clinic respondents, about half of existing programs cover one state. Another quarter cover a part of one state (usually delineated as several counties). The remainder reach multiple states or parts of multiple states. Again, there is no "best practice." But scale matters. The scale of a program influences the types of services offered. The scale of a program shapes the variety of farms and land that are available and sought after. Scale also relates to budgets, staffing and branding.

Programs that cover smaller areas may be more able to deliver on-the-ground services such as site visits and property assessments than programs where travel distances would make such excursions impractical or at least very expensive. On the other hand, a program that "only" manages a web-based posting service could rather efficiently cover an entire state or more. For some programs and audiences, place identity is a selling point. The Hudson Valley (NY) Farmland Finder and Northeast Illinois Farm Link are sub-state examples. California Farm Link and New Jersey Farm Link are statewide examples. The Farmland Access Hub (MN, IA and WI) and New England Farmland Finder (six states) are multi-state examples.

For farm link programs that offer more than online databases, and phone and/or email technical assistance and referral, physical location and distance shape what is possible. How far will a staff person or farm-seeking or transitioning client travel for one-on-one technical assistance or facilitated negotiations? For educational events? Local knowledge can be a real asset. Staff whose ears are to the rail on what properties are available, the local farming culture, and who's looking for what can foster more personal and informed connections than staff whose geographic responsibility precludes a more personal reach. On the flip side, there can be issues with confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and limited options offered to clients in smaller scale programs.

While properties and transitioning farmers are tied to place, seekers may not be. Furthermore, many landowners are not in the same place (or state) as their properties. Seekers might be looking in multiple states, so they could be (and often are) hooked into several farm link databases and programs. Neighboring programs could choose to collaborate—or wind up competing for resources or customers.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION?

While many farm access and transfer challenges can be generalized across the U.S., regions have their unique profiles. In some areas, ranches outnumber farms, while in others land contracts are rare. In the South, heir (or heirs') property is a major consideration. Size and location of farms, value of farmland, type of commodity, farming culture, industry viability (think dairy these days) and demographics of farm seekers are factors in how a program is designed and marketed. They will be reflected, for example, in the questions in a property posting or seeker profile application. They will influence what staff need to know.

> **? GUIDING QUESTIONS**
>
> 1 **Map your terrain: why these areas & boundaries?**
>
> 2 **What are the advantages of this geographic reach? Disadvantages?**
>
> 3 **How do/will the characteristics (production types, natural resource base, demographics) of your domain influence your program?**

> **✓ EXAMPLES**
>
> ▸ **Hudson Valley Farmland Finder** covers the counties of the Hudson Valley, NY.
>
> ▸ **NC FarmLink** covers the state of North Carolina.
>
> ▸ New England Farmland Finder posts properties for six states (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, and VT), three of which also have their own state program (VT, ME, CT).
>
> ▸ **PCC Farmland Trust** serves landowners in three counties in Washington State.

E. AUDIENCES

As noted, farm link programs started by attempting to address the succession needs of transitioning farmers. Based on the survey of farm link programs that attended the national clinic, these days farm seekers are the most often cited audience, followed by transitioning farmers and non-farming landowners. Of course, most programs serve multiple audiences. Regardless of the audience segmentation, farm link program staff must be able to diagnose where their potential clients are at in their grasp of options and stage of readiness. Over-eager efforts to "complete a match" between under-prepared parties could (and have been known to) result in failure and disappointment.

Of the programs at the national clinic that serve farm seekers, about three-quarters prioritize or exclusively serve beginning farmers. New and beginning farmers (NBF) have a unique set of needs related to land access. Programs vary in their capacity to identify and respond to those specific needs. A useful programmatic response will depend on a proper assessment of where that NBF is on his or her path. As many programs have learned, sometimes the best advice is for that NBF to get training and experience before becoming a seeker. Often educating an NBF about tenure options and financial

> *Over-eager efforts to "complete a match" can result in failure and disappointment.*

readiness should precede attempts at "matching," despite how earnest and enthusiastic they may appear. That said, a farmer who has managed a farm operation for a few years is still considered a NBF, but may be ready to scale up to a larger farm, or go from renting to owning.

Some farm link programs struggle with—or avoid— questions around what types of farms and farmers they serve. For example, do you target only farmers with commercial intent (meaning selling, or having the goal to sell farm products as a business, regardless of sales volume) or do you include homesteaders? What about community gardeners? Urban growers? Only "food" producers (including, of course, livestock feed), or do you include ornamental horticulture, fuel and fiber, recreational animals? What about hemp? Aquaculture? Agri-tourism? The "best practice" here is to be clear about your beneficiaries and your program's focus.

Similar considerations apply to transitioning farmers, farming landlords and non-farming landowners. Some farm link programs refer to serving "family farms." This term can be embracing or it can be polarizing. So it matters. Do you work with or want to work with all types and scales of farms? And which landowners? Do you or will you work with institutional landowners such as educational and religious entities? Public landowners? Corporate landowners? Investment companies?

Among the complaints that some programs get from seeker-users are that posted properties are: a) way too expensive; b) way too small; c) way too big; d) without any housing and/or infrastructure; or e) not really suitable for agriculture. But that depends! A high-end property could be attainable for an adequately-resourced farming entrepreneur. A small patch on someone's estate lot could be just right to try out an herb enterprise. One person's "not suitable" could be another person's forest permaculture or raised bed operation.

On the flip side, common complaints from transitioning farmers and non-farming landowners focus on the perceived unpreparedness of the seeker—those "starry-eyed" newbies who could not possibly succeed as a tenant, buyer or successor. This is the biggest turn-off for these land-holding customers. Disclaimers help to mitigate this complaint. But a better practice is to make sure that seekers are adequately trained and ready for what they hope to obtain, and that both parties get adequate support for success—or to cushion disappointment if a transaction doesn't work out.

Some older farmers seek to mentor a younger producer, but may not be looking for a successor. They are willing to train a newer farmer and potentially, for example, lease some land to them in the future. Some farm link programs include this mentoring category among their audiences and design their posting websites to include a mentoring option.

A good practice here is to be clear about why you choose to post certain properties and seekers. Does your program focus on "affordability"? If so, what does that mean? Clarity helps fend off unrealistic expectations— and protect your program's reputation.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS AND JEDI

JEDI stands for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. At their core, farm link programs are about fostering farming opportunity for all. For many of them, social justice and reaching traditionally marginalized populations is important. About half of farm link clinic programs indicated that they include or focus on socially disadvantaged farmers. In general, special populations are an important target audience for many beginning farmer programs. These include farmers and landowners of color, immigrants and refugees, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, farmworkers and military veterans. For some programs, urban farmers are a focus; some provide customized services to women farm seekers, retiring women farmers or "farm spouses" and women landowners.

For these audiences, programming may need to be customized or adapted. A women-only workshop can focus on similar topics as a general workshop, but in a more comfortable environment for some women, and with a focus on particular concerns such as dealing with male tenants or landlords. For immigrant farm seekers, a customized workshop may include language and cultural considerations. Low-literacy seekers and owners may need help with online applications and other computer-based tools. What wording do you use in your outreach to diverse audiences? Often, professional or office language is not the best way to communicate with the agricultural community. Are terms understandable? Might you be inadvertently insensitive? For example, some military veterans do not identify with that term due to stereotyping. Better to ask if they've served in the military. Is your outreach effective to reach them?

Regardless of your audience, a good practice is to elevate awareness of race and equity in your program and among your staff. Increased awareness of personal biases and structural racism (meaning public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms that reinforce and perpetuate racial group inequity) and JEDI training can directly influence program design and overall quality and growth of your farm link program. What work needs to be done in your program or organization to recognize inherent bias? To better serve historically disadvantaged and underserved constituents? Know your limitations and when to hand off or bring in organizations that work with these populations.

What else can you do to build diversity and equity awareness among your audiences? For example, you might help landowners to become more comfortable with potential tenants from a different culture. You could reassure older farmers that a transferee's appearance (e.g., tattoos) does not correlate with higher risk.

> **? GUIDING QUESTIONS**
>
> 1 **Who are your audiences and beneficiaries? Why these?**
>
> 2 **What knowledge and skills must your staff have to engage with and appropriately serve these audiences?**
>
> 3 **How do or will you customize your services for your audiences?**
>
> 4 **How does structural racism manifest in your work?**
>
> 5 **What are you doing to address equity, race and diversity in your program?**

F. ACTIVITIES

This section explores the activities that farm link programs conduct. We'll use the organizing framework described above:

1 **Core services: posting, connecting and matching**

2 **Wrap-around services**

3 **Supporting services**

The core services of posting and connecting are built around a property posting website. Such sites might also maintain lists of seeker profiles. **Core and Wrap-around services will be explored in greater detail in Section IV**. Here we focus on the core service of matching. Then we will look at wrap-around and supporting services.

MATCHING

Ahhh… this is what most people fantasize as "farm link." That magical event where an ardent young farmer and a willing older farmer or landowner meet, shake hands, and clinch the deal. It's what "outside" observers imagine happens and are disappointed or critical when the facts don't live up to the fantasy. It's what those "inside" the

farm link community know to be a complex process—full of complicated transactions, legal and financial detail, delicate facilitation, risk and, yes, disappointment. It's hard. Of the programs attending the national farm link clinic, less than 40% said they engage in facilitated "match" transactions. Pillen and Hinrichs[8] reported that 7% of enrolled seekers secured land through a link program. Among owners, 10% found a farmer through a link program.

Farm link practitioners strive to improve the likelihood of a "successful match." **The diagram on p. 13** highlights all that needs to happen to both sides of the equation to consummate a "match." *The biggest mistake a farm link program can make is to naively introduce two parties and send them on their way, expecting it to "work out."*

8   Pillen and Hinrichs, 2014.

Their "match" will likely falter, and with it, the program's reputation. Furthermore, each side may feel discouraged enough to give up seeking, transferring or making their land available.

That said, farm link programs can and do provide skilled and effective matching services. Assuming that each party is prepared, and the initial pairing is sufficiently vetted, farm link staff can:

▸ Facilitate introductory/exploratory meetings between the parties

▸ Facilitate negotiations between the parties

▸ Coach one or both parties through the process

▸ Help develop lease agreements

▸ Guide purchase agreements for the real estate and/or the operation

SOFT ISSUES *(client perspective)*

▸ Sensitive/emotionally charged issues (e.g., aging, death, finances)
▸ Values, goals, vision
▸ Fears (of change, unknown, future)
▸ Managing emotions
▸ Family and other relationships
▸ Communication challenges
▸ Conflict, disagreement
▸ Interpersonal dynamics (couples/others)
▸ Histories (family, business, community)
▸ Dealing with avoidance, procrastination
▸ Control, authority (assuming/loss of)
▸ Meeting dynamics; meeting management
▸ Expectations
▸ Task management
▸ Decision-making
▸ Trust-building and -mending
▸ Time management

SOFT SKILLS *(staff perspective)*

▸ Communication styles (recognize/manage)
▸ Communication skills: verbal and non-verbal (e.g., active listening, eye contact, reframing)
▸ Focus, clarity, candor
▸ Facilitation; meeting/task
▸ Meeting management
▸ Conflict management
▸ Empathy
▸ Building trust & rapport
▸ Problem solving; brainstorming
▸ Critical thinking, assessment
▸ Integrity (fairness, transparency, honesty)
▸ Organized; time management
▸ Attitude (convey support, positivity, diplomacy)
▸ Set and manage expectations
▸ Balance leading, guiding, advising, consulting & facilitating
▸ Awareness of biases; gender, race, ethnicity, age, culture, values

▸ Guide a gradual transfer/work-in arrangement

▸ Assist in obtaining financing

▸ Assist with easements and other voluntary conservation programs

▸ Coordinate an advisor team (e.g., attorney, appraiser) to support a transaction; refer to specialists

Each of these task areas requires staff to have certain skills and knowledge—at basic or advanced levels of competency. Staff need training to do them properly. This guide does not provide that training, but it does encourage staff to seek out and participate in professional development appropriate to their work. More discussion on farm link staff can be found in **Section V**.

The "process" part is key in dealing with all audiences in a match process. Staff need to understand the "soft issues" and develop "soft skills."

▸ Soft issues refer to the human side of what our clients deal with in these transactions.

▸ Soft skills are the interpersonal and process skills that staff must use with all clients.

As facilitator, staff can make or break a match. A facilitator is not a trainer, consultant, instructor or mediator, although those functions may be part of what a staff person does in the course of helping parties come to an agreement. It's important to know the differences and to be clear internally and with clients.

Coaching may not be the best term, but it's useful to describe the supporting role that staff play with one or both of the parties individually. For example, a staff person would prepare a farm seeker for a meeting with a landowner by helping her organize her questions, rehearse her "pitch," debrief after a meeting or organize a task list. Coaching is not the same as consulting. A consultant is a person who provides expert advice professionally. A coach is someone who guides a process that aims to produce desired results. Like a facilitator, a coach does not presume to have more knowledge than his or her client. Farm link staff may play multiple roles. (See the **Glossary** for definitions.)

Who is the client? Sometimes less-experienced farm link staff aren't clear (to themselves and/or their client) whom they represent. Lack of clarity and transparency on this can lead to problems. Unlike attorneys who must represent one party (unless both sides sign a dual representation agreement), farm link staff can and do effectively facilitate between the parties. To be successful at this, staff must have advanced skills and awareness to honor, manage, and convey the interests of both sides such that all parties trust the process and the staff person.

Leases, purchase and sales agreements, financing, and developing an actual farm transfer agreement require substantial knowledge. This is where staff switch from soft process to hard knowledge—coach to consultant. The "best" practice is to take these on only if staff are adequately knowledgeable and competent to do so. Staff and program managers must know their limitations and where to turn for resources and outside expertise. How knowledgeable is enough? See **Section V** for more on staff roles, knowledge and skills.

Some things to consider when facilitating matches:

▸ What are the criteria that led to selecting these two parties for a match?

▸ What information does the staff person have and need about the parties and situation?

▸ Does the staff person have enough time to stay with the transaction which could take a year or more to complete?

▸ What are the goals and objectives of the parties… and the staff person? Are they clear?

▸ How are information and confidentiality handled? Who gets to see what?

▸ How will you vet referrals to outside resources such as attorneys or estate planners?

▸ What other organizations and resources could help you facilitate a match?

▸ What are the expectations of the client? Have you clearly communicated what is needed and expected of them to negotiate a successful match?

WRAP-AROUND SERVICES

Farm link programs appreciate how important activities *other than* posting websites and facilitated transactions are for their audiences. They have evolved significantly since the early days. Wrap-around activities relate directly to the core posting, connecting and matching services and consist of: a) educational activities; and b) technical assistance (TA). They "wrap around" core services but could be offered by a farm link program that does not have a posting website. As mentioned, land access and farm transfer education and TA are performed by an increasing number of organizations that do not self-identify as "farm links." They may think of and brand themselves as a land access program, or have land access education as part of their beginning farmer training program. They may assist farmers with transfer planning as part of their farm financial management advising.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING AND RESOURCES

All programs represented at the national clinic and most farm link programs offer educational resources and activities to seekers; nearly all do so for their non-farming landowner and transitioning farmer audiences. Educational programming includes:

- **Workshops, classes, and courses** on agricultural land tenure, succession planning, leasing, landowner preparation, and property assessment, for example.

- **Online and print materials**, such as landowner, seeker and succession planning guides, case studies, informational videos, and fact sheets.

- **Individual instruction** on, for example, land tenure options, financing, or farmland protection.

- **Tools** such as search plan workbooks, lease templates, succession planning checklists, property assessment scoresheets and financing worksheets.

- **Mixers**, where the primary objective is to mingle seekers and owners/retiring farmers; most typically include some type of information-sharing.

✔ EXAMPLES

- ▸ Land Access Methods, Build-a-Lease and succession guides **(LFG; see page 57)**

- ▸ **Leasing Farmland in New Jersey: A Guide for Landowners and Farmers**

- ▸ **National Young Farmers Coalition's Finding Farmland Calculator**

- ▸ **American Farmland Trust's Land Access Trainer curriculum**

- ▸ CA FarmLink's **Farm Succession Guidebook**, and **Growing on Solid Ground: A Farmer's Guide to Land Tenure**

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

What is technical assistance? TA can take the form of information or knowledge transmission, instruction, skills training, or advice. TA assumes that the giver has knowledge and expertise to impart (like a consultant). Compare this to facilitation, where the facilitator focuses on the process; s/he doesn't need to have more content knowledge than others. TA goes by various names and covers a wide spectrum: teacher, trainer, consultant, coach, and advisor. In the farm link world, TA is usually delivered to a particular client or situation—an individual, family, or transacting parties. Among national farm link clinic participants, about sixty percent offer some kind of TA.

The term that comes up the most for what farm link program staff do is *hand-holding*, meant in the positive sense of giving personal, customized, attentive support. Easy to intuit what this means; harder to define. It's part active listening, part advising, part problem-solving and part cheerleading. It's being a sounding board, a clarifier. Hand-holding is not the same as facilitation. Like facilitation, it is more process than content, but hand-holding requires a certain amount of knowledge

too. Quality interaction and knowledgeable support are what the majority of farm link customers seek. To this point, quite a few farm link program staff are or have been farmers and/or farm seekers. Although there is no research to substantiate this, it appears that this personal experience helps with hand-holding as well as perceived legitimacy of the program to customers.

Farm link TA can include:

▸ Site assessments for landowners (sometimes prior to posting a property online)

▸ Site evaluations for seekers

▸ Readiness assessment for seekers (financial and other)

▸ Developing search plans for seekers and guiding the search process

▸ Lease development (in consultation with legal counsel)

▸ Navigating loans and lenders

▸ Tenant recruitment

▸ Successor recruitment

▸ Document review

▸ Information and referral to other educational resources, directories, websites, and advisors related to land acquisition and transfer

▸ Process skills, such as effective communication and problem-solving

▸ Succession advising or coordination

Each TA activity contains a world of specialized knowledge and expertise. Read more about staff knowledge and skills in **Section V**. *This guide will not provide you with that expertise*. It's rare for a farm link program to have expertise in all these areas. To be a successful farm link TA provider, consider these general guidelines:

▸ Make sure staff have sufficient expertise, and provide for their professional training.

▸ Be clear about what your program offers or intends to offer—internally and in your branding and outreach.

▸ Develop and adhere to an expertise baseline for staff who do or will do TA.

▸ Create your own approaches, models and protocols *and* learn from what others have already done.

▸ Cultivate strong provider networks and team approaches to providing TA.

ABOUT SUCCESSION PLANNING

Because of its complexity, succession and transfer planning is a unique category. Farm link programs can and do play a role in helping transitioning farm families, but they rarely are full service succession planning providers. Typically, succession and transfer planning require substantial legal expertise, sophisticated financial advising and sustained guidance around the "soft issues" described above. It requires a team of advisors and can take a year or two (or more) to complete the planning process, and often many years to fully implement the transition.

Observers who lament that farm link programs fail to produce successful transfers or continuation of a farm operation miss an important point, which is that, despite the original intent and lofty goals, *most programs are not set up to accomplish this*. As will be discussed in **Section IV**, property and seeker posting websites do not in themselves create a transition plan. They are a piece of a larger puzzle. Farm link-facilitated matches are an important component to support retiring farmers who do not have an identified successor, but not enough. What can farm link programs do around farm succession? As part of a provider team, staff can:

▸ Introduce the topic and provide basic information about what's involved

▸ Conduct an initial assessment and recommend next steps

▸ Facilitate family meetings and the planning process

▸ Coach one or both parties

▸ Line up and coordinate advisors

▸ Help organize tasks and documents

▸ Monitor and spur progress

▸ Hold educational events, mixers, and resource fairs

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ **Minnesota Department of Agriculture's FarmLink program** refers retiring farmers to agency staff who will assist with and support transactions with selected unrelated successors.

▸ Land For Good's state Field Agents coach transitioning farmers through their **succession planning process**. LFG also offers a 3-month Farm **Succession School** for transitioning farmers and farm couples.

▸ **The International Farm Transition Network** is a network of service providers who assist with farm transition. IFTN delivers training to providers.

▸ Forty-one USDA-certified **Ag Mediation Programs** assist with dispute resolution, including those related to farm transfers.

WHICH PART OF THE ELEPHANT?

Farm access and transfer require a systems approach. Systems thinking looks at how elements relate and interact. Like the proverbial elephant, your initial understanding depends on what part of the animal you touch. Groups come to this work through various doors and lenses. They have their hands on different parts of the farm access and transfer elephant.

Quite a few farm link programs are housed in, or affiliated with, land trusts and similar conservation organizations. Their interests are to protect farmland from non-farm uses, keep land in agricultural production, and promote natural resource stewardship and conservation values. They rightfully see land access, tenure and transfer as key to their interests. Agricultural conservation easements— where development rights are removed—are a main

tool for protecting farmland and for land access and transfer. In most cases, an easement makes the land more affordable for the buyer and can provide a source of funds for a transitioning farmer's retirement or heirs. Navigating easements is a specialty. Some link programs will have that expertise in house; others will need to partner with groups with expertise in this topic.

Several farm link programs emphasize land affordability and equitable land access, especially for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. Programs with this focus are particularly interested in methods that make land "more affordable" by promoting easements, leasing and ground leases (in which the tenant rents the land and owns the improvements) in particular, shared or group tenure, and gradual paths to ownership.

Some farm link programs look through the lenses of farming opportunity, farm viability, economic development and food security. They emphasize farm entry, tenure security, farm succession, farm viability, providing local food, and the contributions of farms to rural (and urban) communities.

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ Northwest Arkansas Land Trust, Athens (GA) Land Trust, Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, Vermont Land Trust, Maine Farmland Trust, Columbia (NY) Land Conservancy, Leelanau (MI) Land Conservancy and PCC (WA) Farmland Trust are examples of land trusts that run (or plan to run) farm link services. Most have in-house conservation expertise and tools.

▸ Practical Farmers of Iowa, Renewing the Countryside (MN), FARRMS (ND) and Intervale Center (VT) frame their programs around economic development and farming opportunity.

SUPPORTING SERVICES

Supporting services fall outside core and wrap-around services. They can be offered within a farm link program, by its umbrella organization or by another organization. They target farm link audiences, their service providers and their communities. Supporting activities include:

▸ Business planning for beginning and/or established farmers.

▸ Information and referral not directly related to land; for example, referral to a beginning farmer training program or a farm viability consultant.

▸ Searchable websites connecting farmers with employment, apprenticeships, and/or equipment.

▸ Information and support around farm financing and lending, not necessarily for land.

▸ Beginning farmer training.

▸ Public education and awareness-building on these issues.

▸ Advocacy—local, state and federal policy.

▸ Network and professional development.

Whether your program or organization conducts or plans to conduct any of these activities depends on interests, overarching mission, capacity and need. It's great to be holistic, but not so great to deliver inadequately on what you promise. For most farm link programs, these activities fall outside their mission, and they don't perform them.

G. CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

As environmentalist Bill McKibben said, there are no silver bullets; only silver buckshot. This metaphor is apt for farm link programs. They recognize there's no single solution to the gnarly problems around farm access and transfer. A collection of activities—like buckshot—is likely (we believe) to have an impact. Whatever the array of activities that your farm link program has or

develops, there will be challenges. Here are some that farm link programs have shared. Specific challenges around property and seeker websites will be addressed in .

ENGAGING OWNERS IS HARD

Farm seekers are motivated and often energetic about their pursuits. Non-farming landowners, less so. For all kinds of reasons, older farmers are hardest to engage. This is true for online posting services (discussed in) but also with other activities. Non-farming landowners may not even be aware of the reasons and options to make their land available for farming or to improve tenure conditions. Or they may have concerns and reservations. They may be disengaged from the properties they own. Often they are not adequately conversant with farming to know what they have and how to describe it. They need a lot of hand-holding TA.

Transitioning farmers may have the greatest need for support to exit securely from active farming and to provide a viable farming opportunity for their next generation or unrelated party. They also have many reasons to avoid dealing with transfer planning—such as money, mortality and family dynamics. They are less likely to use the Internet, which is now the most common platform for farm link databases and correspondence.

FARM SEEKERS ARE NOT READY

This comes up a lot. Those starry-eyed young (and not-so-young) new farmers who are gung-ho about finding a farm, but have little or no farming experience. They often have no financial resources, but some have sufficient funds to pursue their "farm to table" dreams. They don't have a business plan. It may be tempting to direct them to a property posting site, and include them in your reporting. It may be better practice to encourage them to line their ducks up and to refer them to a training or apprentice program which will help them get ready to make informed land access decisions. It will also prevent them from disappointing landowners. One of their most

common complaints is that seekers who contact them are totally unprepared. This understandably discourages them.

Most mentioned program challenges

▶ Funding

▶ Getting the word out/marketing

▶ Capacity (staff)

▶ Web technology

▶ Documenting outcomes

▶ Keeping participants engaged

Most mentioned audience challenges

▶ Seeker readiness (lack of)

▶ Not enough properties

▶ Landowner reluctance

▶ Cost of land

▶ Not enough information to make good decisions

▶ Inadequate process skills

? GUIDING QUESTIONS

1   **What activities do you offer or want to offer? WHY?**

2   **How do or will you train staff to deliver education and TA?**

3   **Who else (outside your program) is doing what? What are the gaps? How can you partner with tvhem?**

4   **What are your challenges?**

IV. PROPERTY AND SEEKER POSTING WEBSITES

A. SET-UP AND TECHNOLOGY

As pointed out in , the first farm link services in the 1990s aimed to connect retiring farmers with potential successors. Back then, this was done with paper applications. In the ensuing decades, the Internet provided a whole new way of connecting. Concurrently, farm link programs expanded user audiences to include more types of seekers and owners, and more services, while general awareness about farm access and transfer needs increased dramatically.

The result is a palette of farm link programs; most (but not all) have a web-based property posting component. It bears repeating that an online property posting *service* is not in itself the same as a farm link *program*, although some observers conflate them. Most farm link programs offer multiple activities, so their websites contain features in addition to a property database; these include topical and organizational information, educational resources, events, links, staff directory, and so on.

A key consideration for some programs is whether a target audience has limited or no Internet access or capacity. Rural populations without broadband, plain dress communities and groups for whom English is not their first language are prominent examples.

The posting function is a core feature for many farm link programs. A farm link posting function can range from a simple online classified ad to a high-dollar, high-functioning web-based platform. Regardless of its design, the **purposes of farm link posting websites** usually focus on one or more of these:

- Helping farm seekers find farm property to purchase, rent or manage
- Helping farm and farmland owners find a buyer, tenant or farm manager
- Helping transitioning farmers recruit a non-family successor

FARM SEEKER LIST?

One big distinction among farm link posting sites is whether they post seeker profiles in addition to properties. Seeker profiles enable owners to search for potential tenants, buyers and/or successors and reach out to those they select. They also enable owners to prepare for—or decline—a conversation by "vetting" inquiring seekers. This does not prevent a seeker from contacting them; it makes the contact process two-way and a bit more selective. Seekers can "advertise" themselves in hopes of being contacted by an owner. Hence the importance of a good, clear seeker profile. For example, a seeker just stating she wants to raise pigs without explaining her pasture-based, regenerative practices may dissuade a potential landlord who might make certain assumptions about a hog operation.

Sites that only have property postings leave it to motivated seekers to contact farm owners or their representatives. There is no evidence that one approach is more effective than the other. Some owners report liking to be able to contact seekers; others are not proactive in that way. It depends on program priorities and capacity.

OTHER LINKS?

Some farm link websites also direct farmers and farm owners to other resources and opportunities, via simple or annotated links or posted contact information. These include:

1 Employment
2 Apprenticeships/internships
3 Equipment
4 Training programs
5 Advisors/consultants (financial, appraisers, attorneys,

insurance providers, land use planners, etc.)
6 Land use planning and conservation
7 Farm support programs and organizations
8 Lenders
9 Social, educational and networking events

SITE SET-UP

As mentioned, how sites are set up and perform varies, from a rudimentary classified section of an organization's website or e-newsletter to more elaborate features and functions (see below), some of which resemble a social media platform.

There are four functional categories of these posting sites. The pros and cons of each approach depend on your program goals, staff capacity and budget.

1 **User-led search:** In this model, property postings (and with some sites, seeker profiles) can be viewed and selected for contact by the user. Some sites have a search function where seeker-users can narrow their search by location, type of farm and/or type of tenure. Typically, a user must be registered (see below) to obtain contact information.

2 **Facilitated pairing:** In this model, a human administrator looks for potential compatibility and sends information to the respective parties. The administrator decides what pairings seem promising based on criteria chosen by the program.

3 **Subscription alerts:** In this model, a user opts to be notified of new properties via email. The notifications could be based on pre-selected criteria.

4 **Hybrid:** This model is some combination of the first three.

Like much else about the Internet, website technology is both an asset and a challenge. In the case of farm links, the choice of platforms and other online tools is not straightforward. And not long after any program, including farm links, launches or revamps its online tools, flaws and glitches pop up. Functions become clunky or outdated, and program needs evolve. A farm link website

might consist of several inter-related tools. The trick is to build what you need and can manage/maintain over time.

A platform is a framework or group of technologies to build a website. Each platform has its own attributes. Your choice will depend on several factors:

1 The features you desire
2 The designer you work with
3 Budget
4 Site administrator knowledge and capacity
5 Other needs or limitations of the program or hosting organization

Common platforms used for farm link posting sites include WordPress and Drupal. These are Content Management Systems with relatively easy tools to manage content. If you already are committed to a platform, your farm link features will have to conform to it. If not, it makes sense to decide what features you want and find a designer who uses a platform that can deliver those features. A good hint is to think down the road. You might want the capacity to add a feature you can't manage now.

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ New England Farmland Finder, Vermont Land Link, Hudson Valley Farmland Finder, and NC FarmLink look and function similarly because they are all based on a Drupal platform and created by the same web developer[9]. **PCC Farmland Trust's Farm to Farmer program** also uses Drupal, by a different developer. Many Farm Link Clinic participants agreed that similar-looking sites provide ease of use for seekers with a broad search radius.

▸ **CA FarmLink** offers "hybrid" services with a user-generated portal that includes blind messaging as well as facilitated linking to users with limited comfort with technology.

9 **Tamarack Media Cooperative**

B. FEATURES

Determining what features you want for your posting site is a critical step. Approach web designers with the features you want and see if they use a platform that can perform those functions. There are usually trade-offs. A feature might be possible but take a lot of administrative labor. A feature might be user-friendly but prone to internal glitches. Even computer-savvy administrators might be surprised at how complex even a "simple" suggestion or fix can get. Then there's the balance between being accessible to non-tech savvy audiences and mobile-friendly to appeal to younger seeker customers. Figure out what's necessary versus what's desirable or optional.

Some general considerations include:

▸ Where does user-friendliness fit in your priorities? For what audiences?

▸ How automated do you want the site to be? For example, on some sites, a posting or profile uploads automatically ready to publish. Others require the administrator to manually transfer the application information to the site.

▸ What kind of data do you want to collect? Do you need demographic information?

▸ How will you access or use data that you collect? For example, do you want to have access to an easily generated list of all user emails? Do you want to be able to filter this list?

▸ What is your initial design budget? What is your ongoing site admin budget?

▸ How much flexibility and access will the platform accommodate?

▸ How (if at all) will information input to your site get stored? Not all web platforms and databases are compatible.

▸ How will you address website and user security?

▸ Will you have in house support for site maintenance or will you hire an outside consultant?

Here is a list of features that farm link programs have developed and use successfully. Some are public-facing; others are internal.

- Online user registration for property postings (see more on this below)
- Online user registration for seekers
- Confidentiality features (keeping names and addresses hidden to the public but accessible to users; how is info exchanged?)
- Seeker-user search/filter function by geography and property characteristics
- Map locator for properties
- Administrator's manual pairing function
- Automated alerts; automated confirmations
- Pop-up windows, sidebars, for instructions
- Weekly or monthly digests/subscriptions with new properties (automated?)
- Auto-expire and renew (postings and profiles): this feature is worth calling out. Older sites that don't have this feature are at a disadvantage. A common user complaint is about outdated or date-less postings. Automated renewals, where the user must "re-up" or else the posting/profile expires ensure that properties and seekers are current.
- Information/educational pages related to the posting service. For example, New England Farmland Finder offers a **property posting guide**.
- Links to related educational and other resources offered by the farm link program or others
- User surveys for feedback/evaluation and data collection. Some programs have automated an exit survey upon the user unsubscribing; they mention it in their terms and conditions.
- User editing privileges (postings and profiles)
- Customer Relationship Management interface (e.g., SalesForce)
- Marketing platform interface (e.g., ConstantContact or MailChimp); usually necessary for a subscriber or email digest function (see below)

- Multiple/mobile device usability
- Inquiry response capability (users can send inquiries via email or an online form to which site admin responds)
- Site used as social media: message center; friend a fellow seeker; mark favorites
- SPAM filters or robot buttons; these may make registration a bit harder but can be effective deterrents for SPAM profiles

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Terms and conditions, or terms of service, refers to the rules one agrees to in order to use a service. They effectively form a contract between, in this case, a website and the user. At minimum, every farm link site's terms of service should include disclaimer language that outlines the legal limitations of the website owner's responsibility. The disclaimer should state that the site:

- Is not responsible for the accuracy of information submitted by seekers and owners
- Is not a real estate listing; does not compete with realtors
- Does not sell advertising, sell or rent properties or receive a commission, and is not responsible for the content and representations of any third party linked websites
- Won't share information without the poster's consent or unless otherwise explicitly stated on the website

No program has reported any conflict over terms and conditions; nonetheless, it's advisable to consult with an attorney or replicate or adapt language from other sites (which presumably have vetted their language with a legal advisor). User agreements don't preclude a disgruntled user from complaining.

For posting sites, terms of service might also require the user to agree to complete an exit survey, allow his or her property posting to be featured, or be interviewed, for example.

MARKETING SOFTWARE, CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM) SYSTEMS AND ONLINE DATABASES

Farm link programs use various software to conduct outreach and manage data. Software such as MailChimp can send subscriber notifications and other emails. MailChimp is free for the first 2,000 subscribers. It can be configured to auto-remove expired email addresses. Constant Contact is another frequently used email marketing software. It performs some basic CRM functions, and can be made to work with stand-alone CRM systems such as Apricot (used by Land For Good) and SalesForce (used by California Farm Link). For example, PCC Farmland Trust worked with a consultant to customize its SalesForce platform specifically for land matching information and tracking.

> ▸ **CA FarmLink's new land portal** requires a login to use the integrated private messaging feature while maintaining public listings without the ability to contact landholders and land seekers.
>
> ▸ **Practical Farmers of Iowa's Find a Farmer** enables users to send messages to one another.
>
> ▸ **CA FarmLink's Terms of Service** are posted as a numbered list accessible from the footer menu on its home page.
>
> ▸ **New England Farmland Finder's Terms of Use** are posted right on the home page.

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 **What are your website priorities?**

2 **How much technical knowledge and capacity do or will you have in house?**

3 **What limitations or preferences do you have regarding choice of platform?**

4 **What is your in-house capacity (financial and otherwise) to perform database uploads and updates?**

5 **What do you like about other farm link posting sites?**

EXAMPLE DISCLAIMER from PCC Farmland Trust

Farm to Farmer cannot guarantee a successful farmland-farmer match and is released from responsibility for any loss, damage or injury that may occur as a result of inquiries. By submitting an application, you are giving PCC Farmland Trust permission to post your information on its website. It is your responsibility to contact PCC Farmland Trust if you are no longer interested in participating in the matching project. … You do hereby agree to release and hold harmless PCC Farmland Trust, its cooperating parties and their representatives and agree to indemnify and defend each of them from any and all claims, costs, suits, actions, judgments and expenses, including attorneys' and experts' fees, that may occur in connection with provision or dissemination of such information by PCC Farmland Trust and its cooperating parties. You understand that PCC Farmland Trust has the right to discontinue your participation in Farm to Farmer at any time for any reason whatsoever.

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ **PCC Farmland Trust's Farm to Farmer program's** online map has a zoom lock on it, so people have a sense for where the property is, but they can't zoom in to the precise location. The site also has a private message system which allows people to share more information as they are comfortable.

EXAMPLE DISCLAIMER from Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture Farm Link

This web application is for information and educational purposes only and as a resource for persons seeking opportunities in agriculture. For full details and accuracy, we advise you to visit the website provided for each listing or to contact the individual responsible for the listing. The MDA is not responsible for the accuracy of these listings. MDA is not compensated by or considered a broker, agent, or firm representing any property or other broker, agent, or firm. The listings provided are purely informational and chosen based on building infrastructure and/or land base for a specific use in agriculture or by persons interested in offering an opportunity. Questions pertaining to any one property should be directed to the listed party.

Landowners, realtors, and retiring/beginning farmers desiring to list information and/or properties on this website, may do so by calling 320-XXX-XXXX or emailing XX@state.mn.us.

C. USER REGISTRATION, POSTINGS AND PROFILES

Farm link programs have learned a lot of lessons about user registration and online applications to post farm properties and opportunities. This guide refers to these applications as postings. Those with websites that manage a seeker list have lessons to share too. We refer to applications submitted by seekers as profiles.

STARTING THE PROCESS

Farm link programs invite and manage their users differently. There are three basic choices for users to upload postings or profiles:

1 A one-step process by which users directly upload their posting or profile. This action gets them registered as a user. Typically, the posting is vetted by the administrator.

2 A two-step process by which a user creates an account (registers) and then can submit a property posting or seeker profile; no administrator vetting, although the admin has the capability to follow up with the user for revisions.

3 A two-step process by which a seeker or owner first creates an account (registers) which is approved by the site administrator. Once approved, the user can submit a posting or profile which is also vetted by the admin and then published on the site. In some cases, approval is preceded by a phone call to review the posting or profile and discuss the website and resources, as well as offer guidance to the seeker or owner.

Some programs allow seekers to browse properties or owners to browse seekers without registering. But an account is usually required to obtain the contact information. Many programs send notifications about new postings to registered users, which is a main advantage of registering. More on this below.

The two-step versions, while an extra step and more administration, allow for an initial screening. This helps

to weed out fake accounts and inappropriate users. (In any case, CAPTCHA or other "I am not a robot" tests are valuable to screen fake accounts.) It also engages users. For example, some programs send registered users resource links and other useful information, sometimes based on user information gathered at the initial registration or after to guide admin in the selection of resources to suggest. One downside is that users have to wait for their account to be approved to access the non-public information. This can lead to user frustration if the site administrator is not able to check the site daily.

This schematic shows a simplified site user path with some of the design options noted.

Simplified Website Process Flow Chart

User Creates Account/Registers
↓
Admin Approves (Optional)
↓
User Uploads Posting/Profile
↓
Admin Vets/Edits (Optional)
↓
Posting/Profile Published (Public)
↓
Seeker/Owner Searches Site   *Admin Sorts And Suggests (Optional)*
↓
User Makes Contacts
↓
User Receives Updates (Optional)
↓
User Renews Or Unsubscribes

VETTING AND APPROVALS

User registration usually consists of basic contact information. This info is used to create a user account. Some programs combine user registration with posting or profile upload—the one-step procedure described above. Regardless, vetting (checking and approving) a user and property posting or seeker profile is considered essential by farm link programs for these reasons:

1 **Guarding against inappropriate users and postings.** It's up to the program to decide what's inappropriate. Examples include residential properties with no farming potential, farmers looking for a job (unless the site specifically includes this category), speculators looking for investment opportunities, locations beyond the program's geographic boundaries, or hunting or other recreational leases. It gets a little trickier when it comes to deciding if a seeker is a "legitimate" farmer, if your program includes land buyers as legitimate seekers, or whether to post a marginal property.

2 **Editing the posting or profile.** A common complaint among users is poor or misleading property descriptions or seeker profiles. At minimum, vetting can identify information that seems wrong or suspicious. This can either be easily corrected (e.g., an obviously misplaced decimal point on acreage) or the administrator may contact the applicant to verify the information. Verifying claims made on applications is tricky. Without more information or ground-truthing, it's very hard for the administrator to determine whether the soil is really what they say it is, or that the land qualifies as organic, or that a barn really is in good shape.

The administrator can also exert editorial discretion to reword parts of the application for clarity. Often, the administrator chooses the search property descriptor or keywords based on his or her interpretation of the information in the application. S/he might reword the title to improve searchability.

3 **Assisting the applicant.** In some farm link programs the site administrator (or another staff person) provides some type of technical assistance. These include:

(a) Seeker readiness interview: Staff conduct a phone interview with the seeker applicant in which they explore the seeker's status, desires, and—most importantly—readiness to engage in a farm search.

(b) Owner readiness interview: Staff conduct a phone interview with the owner applicant in which they confirm the information received and assess the owner's understanding of the process and readiness to engage in it. This is also a good opportunity to provide information and TA to support a non-farming landowner or transitioning farmer.

(c) Application review: In this case, staff go over the submitted application in detail by phone with the applicant before publishing it. This is a very effective way to dramatically improve postings and profiles, thereby remedying one of the big challenges discussed above and below.

(d) Site visit: Some programs make site visits to farms prior to posting them online. One purpose of the visit would be to conduct an assessment. At minimum, this gauges the suitability of the property or the transfer opportunity, and assures that the application aligns with reality on the ground. Some programs conduct these visits as more of a meeting to give or gather information about an applicant's succession planning, options for arrangements, and concerns. Staff must be adequately trained to perform this type of assessment. Done well, it's a valuable education and service for landowners.

QUALIFYING THE SEEKER

A few programs have developed innovative responses to a too-frequent lament by owners: seekers are unqualified—not adequately experienced, naïve, etc. Or they are not "real farmers." What counts as a "real farmer" is up to the program, or to the landowner. Does a homesteader, community gardener or so-called "hobby farmer" count, or must they have commercial intent? What about someone who wants a plot to teach about ornamental gardening or composting? Nuances aside, there are too many examples of eager seekers who put their land access cart (the "fun" part) before their experience horse; the outcome is often disappointing if not disastrous for them as well as for the owner. Options?

▸ Programs can informally pre-qualify or helpfully redirect a seeker through the review methods described above.

▸ A few programs have experimented with a seeker "certification" protocol which may include a resume or other documentation of farming experience and relevant education, and/or a business plan/concept

▸ One program requires that the seeker files an IRS Schedule F.

▸ One program uses icons and badges to show the (self-reported) level of seeker experience.

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✓ EXAMPLES

▸ The **Virginia Certified Farm Seekers Program** is a partnership of the VA Farm Bureau and the VDACS Office of Farmland Preservation. Farm seekers who have a business plan, on-farm experience and a relevant resume can be certified as "experienced." The other "regular track" allows those new to farming to register for VA Farm Link, set up farming experiences, complete a farm planning module and develop a business plan and resume.

▸ **NC FarmLink's Certified Farm Seeker Program** demonstrates to owners readiness to run a farm business. Seekers need to demonstrate a completed training program, business plan and/or relevant resume. An icon appears with their name on the seeker list.

▸ In **Tennessee Farm Link's Certified Farm Seeker Program**, certification is awarded when a farm seeker shows one or more of these: prior farm experience; a completed farmer training program; a business plan; and/or a resume highlighting farm knowledge

▸ **CA FarmLink** vets farmers with less than 2 years' experience. It displays "badges" (icons) indicating experience level.

▸ **PCC Farmland Trust's Farm to Farmer Program** uses icons to indicate category of interest—e.g., owner, intern, employee, manager, home garden, incubator, homesteading, and number of years' experience.

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QUALIFYING THE OWNER

We don't know of any "pre-qualification" for property posters, although Hudson Valley Farm Link plans to undertake landowner vetting. While the term "owner" is often used, the person or entity posting a property may not be the legal owner. For example, real estate agents are encouraged to post properties and be the contact persons. Farm link posting websites do not take the place of realtors and are not meant to compete with or circumvent real estate professionals. A family member who is not legally an owner may be selected to be the contact and to manage the search. The site administrator either needs to check or accept that the poster and the property are legit.

WHAT'S IN AN APPLICATION?

Many lessons can be learned about collecting information in posting and profile applications. Often programs wind up with way more than is relevant or useful. Or not enough … Or the wrong information in the wrong format.

That said, these are *not just applications*. Each is a story that publicly displays the history, emotions and desires of farmers and landowners motivated enough to risk signing onto a farm link site. Sharing information about their farming experiences, the generations on their land, the barn they built, or crop experiments that failed isn't easy. Needless to say, each user-applicant deserves consideration, respect, patience and responsiveness, regardless of how the website is designed and managed.

There is no standard or "best" farm link property posting or profile application. But with a few dozen application examples online, it's well worth doing the research before reinventing an application or repeating others' mistakes. Here are a few examples of what to avoid:

1 Using an unlimited-word text box without guidelines for a property description. This usually results in a lot of detail that may not be relevant to a seeker. At this stage, how much does a seeker need to know about each beloved piece of the owner's equipment?

2 Too-limited checklists of enterprises, commodities or infrastructure which don't allow for other options.

3 Unclear or vague wording around tenure options (e.g., just saying "lease").

4 Questions that lead to unhelpful answers (e.g., "Is water available?").

5 Requesting information that the program might like (for evaluation, for example) that might not be appropriate for the public, such as race, ethnicity, and age.

Start with the basics:

▸ What information is necessary? Why do you want it? Why would a seeker or owner want it?

▸ What will you do with the information? How will you manage it?

▸ How will you actually use it?

▸ How much is too much?

▸ What information will be public?

▸ How much can be automated and where do you want a human touch?

▸ How might completing the application help a farmer or farmland owner to better understand their situation and goals?

Once you determine what information you need and for what uses, you'll need to consider design and format options. Sometimes your information preferences will be driven by your platform limits. Considerations include:

▸ Required versus optional questions

▸ Dropdown menu, checkboxes or text boxes? Which method for which questions? What is the optimal combination?

▸ Instructions in scroll-over popup boxes?

▸ Exact numbers versus numerical ranges (e.g., for acreage or price)

▸ Word limits?

▸ Photos? How many? Size? Orientation?

▸ Attachments (e.g., a soils or GIS map, existing conservation easement, PDF flyer about a property, or seeker resume)

▸ Standardized descriptors or keyword choices (for example, the property "name" to make it easily searchable, such as Farm Name, acres, tenure type, town, state)

▸ Personal statements: A paragraph or two of owner or seeker values, goals, preferences, and similar biographical and situational description can be quite impactful. A narrative summary also can highlight or reinforce the important aspects of the farming opportunity available or sought.

▸ Allowing for multiple properties to be posted by one registrant

▸ Who can see what? Can seekers view other seeker profiles?

D. SITE ADMINISTRATION

Even the most bare-bones and automated posting site needs administration. All farm link online posting services require a human touch. Site administrators make sure the posting site is working smoothly. In some programs, the administrator performs a manual search for compatibility and informs the parties about one another. Usually, this is in addition to searches that registered users perform on their own. The administrator needs to be adequately informed and trained to make appropriate selections.

Depending on the site's features, the site administrator has several other important roles to play:

▸ Troubleshooting: this is critical. Glitches occur. Postings disappear, functions freeze, etc. The administrator must have sufficient technical knowledge and/or a relationship with the site designer to diagnose and fix problems.

▸ Interviewing users, as detailed above.

▸ Quality control, from spelling to making sure photos and attachments upload correctly to assuring no confidentiality breaches.

▸ Answering queries, usually via an email address for that purpose.

▸ Managing data and site analytics.

▸ Posting to other platforms, such as a Facebook page.

▸ Tracking user contacts to each other with, for example a blind email function.

▸ Monitoring auto-expire and renew functions.

▸ Automated surveys upon expiration or removal of a posting or profile.

▸ Coordinating with database and marketing platforms. For example, several farm link programs use ConstantContact to send email messages to new subscribers.

▸ Engaging users: Successful programs do more on and with their posting sites than publish postings and profiles. User engagement can include:

> Welcome emails with service terms, instructions, and other services offered

> TA on good postings and profiles, usually by email or phone

> Good referrals, particularly for users that the administrator deems not ready or appropriate for a posting or profile

> Weekly updates/new postings, sometimes in the form of an emailed digest

> Regular or periodic communications with helpful search tips, success stories, etc.

> Webinar on how to use the site

▸ Curating information so it's current and interesting to users

E. CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Many lessons can be learned here about managing a posting site. In no particular order, here are several that farm link programs have faced, and that you might too.

▸ **Cost:** Budgets for online posting sites are a little tricky to determine. This is because the costs associated with the particular posting function may be hard to tease apart from a program's other web (and non-web) features. Direct costs would include site hosting, site maintenance fees and staff time. A survey question on this to farm link clinic participants revealed a range of $500 to $35,000 per year. The lower figure is probably for monitoring self-uploads of classified ads for properties to an e-newsletter. It's no surprise that more features means more design and admin costs. More complex sites may mean more expensive admin, troubleshooting and fixes. On the other hand, efficiencies can be realized when a highly functional website takes the place of—or augments—human staff time. Read more about budgets and fundraising in **Section VIII**.

▸ **Fees:** Programs vary as to charging user fees. Some charge nothing; some charge a base amount to both owners and seekers. Others see fees to owners as a disincentive (see next bullet). One argument says a fee reflects value. Some programs have found that fees are not worth the administrative effort (e.g., online payment, etc.).

▸ **Seeker to property ratio:** This may be the most often-cited lament—that there are so many more seeker-users than properties. Seeker to owner ratios run as high as 10:1; this has been consistent since the beginning of farm link programs, and across all regions. Whether this is really a problem depends on one's perspective. In the housing market, there are always more buyers than properties. More properties doesn't necessarily guarantee more matches. That said, there is strong consensus that more postings is better and worth pursuing.

A combination of research and speculation sheds some light on reasons why it's hard to get more properties posted:

> Seekers are more motivated

> Seekers tend to be younger and more computer savvy

> Owners tend to be older, more cautious and less computer literate

> Retiring farmers don't want others to know about their farm or plans

> Non-farming landowners are not aware of the possibilities for farming on their land, or are absentee landlords who don't need this service to find a tenant

> There are more new farmers without family farms

> Non-farming landowners and retiring farmers don't know about the service (it's harder to reach them)

> Less programmatic support for landowner outreach and support than for seekers

Some of these obstacles can be mitigated with education and outreach. See **Section VII**. Others are embedded in the issues we face in this work. We can do more to reach and reassure landowners, and to make our posting sites accessible. We can emphasize to retiring farmers that, notwithstanding legitimate concerns about revealing their plans, they display responsible leadership in making sure their farm/land is kept active and made available.

That said, posting sites are one tool among several for seekers and owners to achieve their objectives. They are not the entire solution. Owners should be encouraged to use multiple methods depending on their preferences and concerns.

▸ **Poor quality postings:** How a property, opportunity or seeker is described may make all the difference as to the appeal to the searching party. One of the biggest complaints of seekers and site administrators are postings that are too vague, incomplete or misleading.

And usually there's not much the site admin can do unless individual pre-posting interviews are part of the process. Such interviews have multiple benefits, but aren't always feasible. It's not that property posters are intentionally misleading or incomplete. Rather, they (especially non-farming landowners) may not know details like exact acreage. (Maps are one way to clarify and display the offer.) Do they include the field edges? Does an unused and overgrown field "count"? Some spend more time on the features of the residence's kitchen then on the soil types—again; it's what they know. Some would not know which crops are suitable; what should they check off? The **New England Farm Link Collaborative's guide to posting a property** is one attempt to mitigate this problem. Another strategy is to make the posting application as clear and simple as possible, while also allowing for description and personality to show through. Having a text box for "more information" and the option for photos and attachments.

▸ **Which properties to include?** For some programs, this is easy; their farms and ranches—and the opportunities they offer—are fairly similar and obviously in the farm link ballpark. For others, this question comes up quite a bit. It can be a topic of discussion, if not tension.

> *Too small:* is a half-acre for rent appropriate? For some locations and target audiences, it isn't "too small" to be of potential interest to a seeker.

> *Too expensive:* seekers in some locations complain about this. "Why are you posting million-plus dollar properties?" While it's understandably frustrating to see farms that are beyond the reach of some farmers, a strategic program will either decide a price ceiling or explain up front that there are no limits placed on properties based on price; someone (or a group) might be able to buy the property and make viable farming uses on it themselves or by renting it to farming tenants. Or some other type of arrangement such as lease-to-

own or subdividing might be possible. Remember, affordability is relative.

> *It's not a farm:* Is a wooded property okay to post? It might be suited to agro-forestry, permaculture or clearing for crops or pasture. What about a horse farm? Animal sanctuary? Homesteading (as opposed to commercial farming)? Hemp? Urban plots? Aquaculture? A large backyard? Co-uses such as recreational hunting? These are judgment or policy calls for each program to make.

> *Land owned by investors or investment entities:* Another judgment or policy determination. Some groups are not supportive of investors as farmland owners, while others see opportunity. Some distinguish among investor types and methods. And others feel that any landowner can post a farm property or farming opportunity.

▸ **Which seekers to include?** Similar to the question above, can any seeker register? What about real estate professionals? Investment entities? Solar and wind farm companies? Non-farming land stewards? Recreational land buyers? These categories are not just theoretical; they come up.

▸ **Case management:** Experienced farm link practitioners know that working with these audiences—even if only to track posting site users—has a social services feel. How registered site users, workshop participants, TA recipients and transacting parties are handled matters a lot—from the first contact to the final evaluation request.

In case management lingo, there are four key components:

1 Intake

2 Needs assessment

3 Service planning

4 Monitoring and evaluation

You can see how this framework can apply to our work with our audiences. For example, what intake information should be collected? How—in what

format or via what platform? Where is it stored? Who gets to see it? Some programs have an online intake form for their posting and/or TA services.

What comprises an assessment, who does it, and how is the information handled? How are contacts, meetings and decisions tracked? Experienced program staff know that a "case" can meander, go dormant and reappear.

▸ **Case management software:** A variety of case management software can be used by farm link programs, although it's not necessary to employ such a tool at all. Case management software may be customized for social services, legal services or nonprofits. Some software combines case management with other so-called customer relationship management (CRM, such as Salesforce) functions such as donor management, volunteer and event tracking, and marketing. Hudson Valley Farm Link Network has an "internal notes" section for each profile that is visible to staff but not the public. As with most software, it depends on what you need and want, and can handle and afford.

▸ **Confidentiality:** What assurances do or will you give to your clients about confidentiality? How will you use and protect their information internally and beyond your program? For example, if you are working with a farm seeker who is also talking with lenders, who has permission to share what? If you are facilitating a transaction, what do you share between the parties? Did you get permission? Concerns about confidentiality apply particularly to landowners and their properties, but even some workshop attendees are skittish about who will get their contact info.

▸ **Hacking, safety and background checks:** Being clear about limitations of online tools, including potential hacking, is important. Equally, making sure that your clients know about and accept your disclaimers—for example, that you do not do background checks—is essential.

▸ **Follow-up:** Do or will you follow up with them? How? How will you know when a case is "closed"? See **Section VI** on follow-up for evaluation purposes, below.

▸ **Keeping users engaged:** Successful farm link programs capitalize on their customers' motivation, whether they post a profile, attend a workshop or seek advice. Keeping them engaged after their initial posting is both good service and good marketing. For example, some programs send regular "digests" of new or featured properties. Seeker or owner users could receive monthly "helpful hints" and links related to their search. These messages can be automated. For instance, new registrants receive an automated email with profile writing resources in their first week after engaging with the site. These engagement messages require staff effort, but pay off by not only educating the user but also keeping them motivated and involved in their own search process. It also reinforces your program, especially if you include reminders about what you offer.

▸ **Perceived or potential tension with real estate professionals:** Farm link programs do not—and do not want to—compete with real estate professionals. Some programs encourage agents to use farm link sites to post suitable properties. If an agent represents a particular property, that agent would be identified as the contact. Farm link programs amplify an agent's reach. Other programs focus on connecting exiting farmers with successors and/or landowners with tenants, where real estate professionals would not likely be involved.

✔ **EXAMPLES**

▸ **NC FarmLink** posts to social media and sends a newsletters with either a monthly seeker, property listing and/or resource provider highlight in the form of an interview, video clip or testimonial quote/photo.

▸ **CA FarmLink** features properties on the website banner, a regular blog, postings to social media, and quarterly newsletters.

▸ **Maine Farmlink's homepage** shows a couple of featured properties and a featured topic of interest.

▸ Land For Good and the New England Farm Link Collaborative offer trainings (with continuing education credits) for real estate professionals. A page on **LFG's website lists tools and resources** targeted to this audience.

❷ **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

1 **What do you want your posting website to do? What's feasible?**

2 **What do you like (or not like) about the user registration and posting/profile applications of farm link sites you have visited?**

3 **How will you develop policies around confidentiality, qualified postings/profiles, and case management?**

V. STAFFING

A. STAFF ROLES

Even the most bare bones, automated property posting service needs human staff to manage it. Nearly all farm link programs do—or want to do—more, so staffing becomes a critical factor. In fact, staff capacity—time and competence—is one of the most frequently cited challenges among farm link programs. How much staff time can be devoted to the activities you have or want to offer? More importantly, *what do staff need to know and do* to be effective in delivering your activities?

It might help to think of functional categories for farm link program staff:

1   Website administrator

2   Educator

3   Technical assistance provider (advisor/coach)

4   Transaction facilitator

The skill and knowledge sets for each category are unique, with some overlap. A **site administrator** may only have (important) technical responsibilities; but certain knowledge and judgment will be needed to, for example, determine the adequacy of a property posting or seeker profile. Or that person may be responsible for deciding which properties and seekers to suggest—a task that requires sufficient knowledge about interpreting postings and profiles, and what to look for in terms of potential compatibility.

An **educator** needs to have an adequate grasp of the content material along with skills as a teacher. The material around land access and transfer is quite broad and complex; the learning curve can be steep and winding. Staff who offer one-on-one **technical assistance** (advisor, coach) must also have a solid grasp of the content and a clear sense of boundaries and expectations, along with good process ("soft")

skills. They must know when and where to refer an advisee. Someone who **facilitates transactions** must have substantial process skills *and* knowledge. These transactions are both complex and delicate. This is where consequential mistakes can happen—where a little knowledge is dangerous, and staff can get over their heads pretty quickly.

What is the job? Job descriptions (and titles) vary. Among current farm link programs, job titles include:

▸ Farm Link Manager

▸ Farmer Outreach Coordinator

▸ Next Generation Coordinator

▸ Navigator

▸ Field Agent

▸ Regional Coordinator

▸ Coach

▸ Beginning Farmer Program Coordinator

▸ Farm to Farmer Coordinator

You can imagine how varied these job descriptions are. Often staff who manage farm link activities also have other responsibilities, so farm link tasks might only be a small part of their job.

B. SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Advisors, consultants, teachers and trainers are expected to impart knowledge and information. In comparison, facilitators (*coaching* is a term used by some farm link programs) help others move through a process toward what *they* wish to accomplish. Generally, facilitators don't necessarily know (or need to know) more than their clients; they need the skills to guide a process. In farm link programs that facilitate matches (recall "matching" is one of the three core services), staff need enough knowledge to, for example, lay out the options for transferring assets over time. They don't need to be experts, but they need to know when to call one in.

Often staff perform some combination of education, TA and facilitation. Staff will likely wear multiple hats. That makes sense because the required skills and knowledge overlap, and efficiencies can be gained. Regardless of the hat or job description, successful and established programs look out for the danger zone—that place where enthusiasm outpaces competence.

Are you telling your seekers and owners something based on your expertise, or helping them arrive at a solution themselves? Do you know enough to give advice or information? How do you know if you (or your staff) know enough? Are you guilty of *ultracrepidarianism*?

Experienced programs:

▸ Prioritize staff training. This is done in house or by outside subject experts. For example, Land For Good's field agents have monthly professional development sessions—sometimes bringing external consultants such as a lender or appraiser, and sometimes doing internal peer-to-peer case clinics or training by a field agent with expertise in a specific topic.

▸ Recognize the importance of fit between staff and audience. For example, having a young staff person working with a senior farmer can create credibility and empathy hurdles. A staff person with farming experience must be sensitive that their experience isn't representative of everyone's.

▸ Know staff limitations and where to establish boundaries or backstop them. They know where to turn in and outside their organization to fill expertise gaps.

▸ Watch for staff attitudes, biases and assumptions. For example, is it okay for a staff person to imply (verbally or non-verbally) that a potential farm is "too rural" or "not affordable"? Experienced programs make sure staff are made aware of unconscious biases, especially regarding diverse populations, age and gender. They take time to unpack assumptions about land ownership, secure tenure, and "sustainable" farming, for example.

▸ Have solid referral networks. They know how to develop and work with provider teams based on the customer's needs and staff capacity. (See **Section IX**.)

▸ Effectively balance technology with the human touch.

▸ Learn how to optimize organizational capacity. They make the best use of volunteers without compromising consistency and quality.

▸ Take advantage of other resources and potential partnerships and networks, such as beginning farmer training programs, farm succession workshops, and farmland conservation organizations.

> **❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS**
>
> 1 **What are the farm link-related job descriptions for your program?**
>
> 2 **What relevant expertise do you have within your program/organization?**
>
> 3 **How do or will you train your staff?**
>
> 4 **How do or will you set boundaries and expectations?**

VI. METRICS AND EVALUATION

No one disputes the need for accountability in farm link programs. Good programs should be able to demonstrate results. But what constitutes success is one of the most vexing problems facing farm link programs. "Recent studies observe a dearth of information about the effectiveness of linking services, and note a need to better understand their contributions."[10]

This guide is not a tutorial on designing a good evaluation protocol. Rather, it focuses on successful approaches and challenges to evaluation faced by farm link programs. That said, it might help to review some basic evaluation terms:

- **Goals:** General, broad statements of what you want to achieve.

- **Objectives:** Specific, measurable targets or steps toward achieving a goal.

- **Activities:** Actions taken, e.g., a workshop or an advising session.

- **Outputs:** what you produced; products and services (sometimes synonymous with activities).

- **Outcomes:** What occurred *as a result* of activities; changes in conditions, knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviors, linking directly to program goals and objectives (often confused with outputs).

- **Impacts:** The longer-term or higher-level consequence of the activities.

- **Indicators:** A qualitative or quantitative means of showing changes related to specific objectives or goals.

10 Valliant, Ruhf et al., 2019.

For example, one farm link program *activity* is providing technical assistance to farm seekers. A related *output* is number of seekers receiving advice or number of advising hours. One hoped-for *outcome* would be a certain percent of those advisees make more informed decisions about farm leases. One *indicator* of this is the number (percent) of TA recipients who report or demonstrate increase in knowledge about leases. The *impact* could be more secure tenure for more beginning farmers in your domain.

We tend to think in terms of proving our worth to the entities that fund us. But other target audiences are (or should be) interested in your effectiveness. Program evaluation can help improve staff performance and the internal workings of a program. Evaluation data can be an effective marketing tool: "We've helped over 100 farmers get onto land in our county; we can help you!" Several programs at the clinic remarked that it was important to convey confidence and optimism to potential customers.

Program facts and stories can influence policymakers and help researchers. And don't forget your public audience. Reporting on your program can build awareness about the issues. Linking evaluation results to public perceptions and expectations is critical to advocating for farm link programs.

A. WHAT WILL YOU EVALUATE?

Farm link programs are notoriously hard to measure and to demonstrate meaningful results. What is meaningful, and to whom? What is the story you want to tell? As with many social programs, qualitative indicators matter as much as quantitative ones. Qualitative evaluation tools include interviews, observations, case studies (stories) and testimonials. Open-ended questions in surveys fit in this category too. You may have heard, "No numbers without stories; no stories without numbers" to guide effective program evaluations. Qualitative data helps explain complex issues and can fill out a picture where numbers can't—especially when the numbers look meager.

The most typical default quantitative indicators used by farm link programs are "number of links" and/or "number of matches." If you've read through the guide this far, it will be obvious why numbers of links or matches can be tricky outcome indicators. And for farm link programs as a collection, the variation in metrics is frustratingly misleading. Recall that programs at the national clinic reported annual "links" or "matches" ranging from 2 to 3,000.

What counts as a match? How do you know it was successful? For some, it's evidence that a deal was clinched (e.g., a purchase or signed contract). Other programs reported "promising first meeting" or "the farm stays in farming" as success. One respondent to a researcher's survey stated, "We don't have a goal of matches made. … A match really means nothing unless it's a sustainable arrangement." For comparison, consider online dating sites: they promise you'll learn of people you might want to date or who might want to date you. They do not promise you'll actually date anyone on the site, find a partner, or get married, let alone stay married or otherwise "permanently" together.

To add to the conundrum, let's revisit the difference between a property/seeker posting site and a farm link program. To measure the effectiveness of your posting site, what metrics would be valid? Numbers of properties and seeker profiles are outputs. A lot of programs get hung up on this metric. They focus on "getting more properties" under the hypothesis that more properties = more effective. But do we know this? What does the number of properties, or registered users, or website visits tell us? This is one place where adding a story or two can make an impression.

Realistic metrics derive from reasonable objectives. If one objective of your site is to foster contacts between parties, numbers of contacts is a reasonable outcome metric. Otherwise, contacts are outputs toward an outcome such as the elusive "match." You just need to figure out how to count "contacts." In one example, California FarmLink uses a blind email function that tracks email exchanges between registered site users.

If your posting website does not promise increased knowledge or matches, don't burden your evaluation with those expectations. On the other hand, programs that aim to improve the knowledge and competence of their registered site users, even if they don't find a "match," can proudly claim that, for example, 85% of their users report increased knowledge and confidence to make good land access or transfer decisions.

If your program goals include increasing the competency of farm seekers to make good land acquisition choices, improving landowners' ability to offer favorable leases, or improving succession planning, your evaluation questions will be more tuned to what your audiences learned and decided, not directly associated with a search.

Sometimes an outcome is estimated by proxy. For example, if a desired outcome is seekers' increased ability to make informed decisions about land access, you might assume that receiving two hours of TA, or contacting at least three owners led to that increase, even if you did not get explicit feedback about increased ability.

Experienced farm link staff recognize that redirecting an eager newbie away from prematurely acquiring a farm, and toward production training and business planning through good advising is a form of success. Similarly, not consummating a particular deal can also be a positive outcome. For some, "failure avoided" is a success.

Often farm link programs target certain populations. So their metrics will want to capture demographics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and location, for example. Staff may want to collect data on farm characteristics (e.g., commodity, practices, scale, markets), years of farmers' experience, etc.

Output metrics, examples

▶ Number of properties

▶ Number of subscribers

▶ Number of "links" or "matches"

▶ Number of contacts made/received

▶ Number of workshops/ attendees/trainees

▶ Number of TA recipients

▶ Number of leases worked on

▶ Hours of TA provided

Outcome metrics, examples

▶ Number of transactions (however you define)

▶ Number of signed leases

▶ Number of sales

▶ Number of succession agreements

▶ Demonstrated/reported increase in knowledge, competence, confidence, skills (better prepared/ better decisions)

▶ Changes/actions taken or intended

While all farm link programs strive to make an impact, some explicitly aim to demonstrate their **impact**, naming indicators such as:

▶ Number of acres kept in active ag

▶ Number of farms staying in farming

▶ Net increase in farms

▶ Number of new farmers with secure tenure

▶ Number of farms preserved (however defined)

▶ Number of jobs created; economic contributions to local/regional economy

▶ Improved farm viability

▶ Policy wins

These are lofty targets and, like many desired impacts, difficult to demonstrate. On the other hand, successful programs also count "customer satisfaction" as a legitimate outcome. This concrete line of inquiry helps programs find out if they are delivering: a) what their audience wants; and b) what the program promised. They ask questions like:

▶ Were your expectations [about what you would get from our program] met?

▶ Were you satisfied with the help or information you received?

▶ Did our program meet your needs?

▶ Would you recommend our program/services to others?

▶ What dollar value would you place on the service you received?

What will you measure?

▶ Changes in knowledge, behavior, etc.

▶ Quality of service/program

▶ Results (# "connections," transactions)

▶ Effort (e.g., staff hours, resources applied)

B. HOW WILL YOU EVALUATE?

Farm link programs employ several evaluation tools, depending on what they want to measure and from whom they want the feedback (targets).

Farm Link Evaluation Tools

▶ Online surveys

▶ Paper surveys

▶ Interviews

▶ Website analytics

▶ Event evaluation forms

▶ Staff metrics

▶ Staff reports

▶ Case studies

Evaluation Targets

▸ Registered website users

▸ Registered users' actions

▸ TA recipients

▸ Workshop/event attendees

▸ Inquirers/referrals

▸ Parties to a transaction

▸ Materials recipients

▸ Other providers

SURVEYS

Many farm link programs use surveys to collect evaluation information. Experienced programs have learned to streamline their surveys, asking only what is useful to what they want to evaluate. Surveys can be administered to registered website users, TA recipients, workshop attendees and fellow service providers. It's a best practice to use a combination of closed- and open-ended questions.

Successful programs report these survey-related practices:

▸ Annual online survey of registered website users via email software such as Constant Contact, Survey Gizmo or Survey Monkey.

▸ Automated exit survey (when registered user terminates) using email software.

▸ Follow-up surveys—six or twelve months after the event, TA or user termination.

▸ Requiring an upfront commitment to completing a survey (e.g., in contract or terms of service); sometimes as a condition of renewal or exit from the program.

▸ Phone surveys: Can be the same or different questions from electronic or paper surveys, usually set up with quantifiable metrics such as rating and ranking scales.

▸ Interviews: More open-ended (than a survey) phone or in-person structured conversations memorialized in notes or recordings from which qualitative data and quotes can be extracted.

▸ Offering a raffle prize (e.g., $50 gift card) to those who complete the survey.

▸ Asking permission to use quotes and/or stories from surveys and interviews; being clear about using names or quotes anonymously.

WHO WILL EVALUATE?

Some programs employ third party evaluators. This is relatively common in programs with USDA funding such as the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. Some work with university professionals. Others rely on their program's or organization's internal capacity. Participatory evaluation engages program beneficiaries in the design and implementation of evaluation objectives and methods.

C. EVALUATION CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Farm link programs report many evaluation challenges and considerations, including the following:

▸ Making sense of the data: What conclusions can be drawn from Google analytics or 40 workshop evaluation forms? How many responses are needed to be "meaningful"? How can results be translated (or spun)?

▸ One-time snapshot or tracking? Will a survey be administered to the same audience more than once to document changes over time? Can the evaluation tool be replicated?

▸ Longer-term follow-up challenge: For many farm link beneficiaries, actions happen long after their engagement with the program has ended. How will you follow up with and learn from your customers?

▸ Low response and return rates; many variables contribute to this frustrating reality. Programs report that incentives (e.g., entered into a raffle, gift certificate) don't necessarily work.

▸ Limited capacity to design and implement any evaluation. Setting up the mechanism involves a fair amount of forethought and sometimes coordination with your organization's operations or systems manager.

▸ Human limitations: biases, tone, language, inappropriate prompting, consistency…

▸ Question wording and design; use of jargon, technical or vague language; asking more than one thing in a question.

▸ People have difficulty formulating answers about attitudes, opinions, and learnings.

▸ Collecting stories and testimonials: these are powerful, but they take time and effort to collect a well-written, accurate, and appropriately acknowledged or anonymized narrative.

▸ Customizing to the target audience: will older farmers respond to Internet surveys? Has the evaluation tool been tailored for low literacy or non-English speaking audiences?

▸ Program capacity: too often, evaluation falls to the bottom of the to-do list. Staff don't have the time or competence to design and administer effective evaluations. One rule of thumb is to devote 10% of capacity to evaluation.

▸ Can farm link program evaluation be integrated with evaluations of other activities in the host organization? Or might beneficiaries be inundated with too many surveys?

▸ Staff tracking: if a program is measuring effort, does staff have useful and efficient ways of tracking and reporting their hours spent on identified categories of effort?

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 **What are your top priorities to evaluate?**

2 **What evaluation tools and methods make sense for your program?**

3 **Who will you share your evaluation results with? Funder/donors? Partners? Clients? General public?**

4 **Which farm link program evaluation practices (from this section) do you find attractive or useful for your purposes?**

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ When users of the **NJ Land Link** website close a posting, they receive an auto-email thanking them for participating in the program and encouraging them to complete a short exit survey (via a link included in the email). The survey asks about their outcomes (whether and how they found a match, the type of arrangement made, and the acres involved), their use of and satisfaction with the website, and what they like best about the website and what they'd improve.

▸ PCC Farmland Trust developed key performance indicators *(see the box on the next page)*.

Key Performance Indicators
(Example evaluation protocol adapted from PCC Farmland Trust)

Data from: (date to date)

Definitions:

▸ **Match**: a signed lease or closed sale
▸ **Connection**: When a land owner and farmer have made contact with each other independently or with our assistance.
▸ **Action Taken**: Any further assistance or resource provided.
▸ **Successful**: a business is operating on land.
▸ **Unsuccessful**: the conversation between the landowner and farmer has ended.

Number of Connections:

▸ Conversation/action between two parties
▸ Confirmed matches
▸ Unsuccessful matches (and why they fell apart)
▸ Clicks on "contact" buttons through Google Analytics

Number by stage:

▸ New
▸ Introduced
▸ Negotiated
▸ Lease/PSA signed
▸ Cancelled

Number of farmer/parcel actions by type:

▸ Intake calls
▸ Site visits
▸ Referrals to technical service providers or other programs
▸ Emails or phone follow-up that assist with further matching

Other Indicators:

▸ Number of acres available
▸ Number of acres matched
▸ Number of businesses on land
▸ Number of listings by farmer/parcel
▸ Number of seeker listings
▸ Number of active seekers
▸ Number of unsuccessful matches
▸ Average # of actions taken to make successful connections
▸ Average # of actions taken on unsuccessful connections
▸ Number of listings posted by each account
▸ Farm-to-Farmer listings converted to conserved properties
▸ Users creating accounts, but not listings

VII. BRANDING, MARKETING AND OUTREACH

*Farm link programs: less than you expect…
or more than you think?*

A. PROMOTING YOUR PROGRAM

All programs want to attract "customers." We want our audiences and colleagues to know about us, value our work, and use or refer people to our services. To make this happen, we need persuasive messages (what and why), delivered effectively (how) to the appropriate targets (who).

Farm link programs are compelling. Most people think they're a good idea, and most people don't understand what they actually do. An opportunity and a challenge! Even among farm link programs, nailing the message is harder than we expect. At the national clinic, program staff were asked to deliver a 30-second "elevator speech" about their program. Some found this amusing; others frustrating. Of course we can't capture what we do in less than a minute, let alone within today's 8-second average adult attention span (one second shorter than the attention span of a goldfish[11])!

So it's really important to hone the message. And the pitch will vary according to your target audience. Non-farming landowners may resonate to messages about farmland conservation, local food production and land stewardship, whereas retiring farmers might be more attracted to messaging about the number of qualified transferees out there or helping new farmers.

WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT ARE YOU SELLING?

Several types of organizations host farm link programs. (See **Section IX** for more on this topic.) For better or worse, audiences have certain notions and stereotypes about organizations. State agencies are too bureaucratic. Land conservation groups don't understand farming or want to take property rights away. Beginning farmer organizations produce naïve, under-prepared farmers. Nonprofit groups (especially those using terms like organic and sustainable) disdain conventional farmers. Overcoming these assumptions isn't easy. But good messaging will help. One well-placed testimonial could dissolve a negative opinion. This challenge applies to direct beneficiaries as well as to groups you want to count on to help you reach your beneficiaries. When working with others, defuse any negative stereotype by emphasizing common cause.

Are you promoting your online property posting service? Or do you want to let people know about your range of offerings that might include workshops, TA, and/or online publications? Recall the categories of services outlined in Section III. The messaging for a posting website is quite different from marketing a beginning farmer program that offers business planning, land tenure education *and* 1:1 TA. Even within a posting service, the words *land, farm, operation, business,* and *transfer*, for example, can confuse and dissuade potential beneficiaries.

A recurring theme in this guide is farm link programs' managing expectations. If the farm link brand is all about *matching* seekers with retiring farmers and other landowners, that's what the message and expectations will focus on. If your farm link programs is broadly about *farm access and transfer,* the message, metrics and expectations shift.

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11 **http://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/**

Experienced farm link programs offer the following program promotion hints:

▸ Address both "what" and "why." You can tell people that you connect farm seekers with exiting farmers, but framing your work as a response to farmers' biggest challenges (land access and farm succession) is more powerful.

▸ Pitch what the customer gets, rather than what you do.

▸ Remember about stories and numbers (see **Section VI**). Stories and testimonials—written or video—are highly impactful. Real life cameos and quotes from satisfied customers add a face to your work. Numbers show you are effective and make you look professional.

▸ Photos of successful transactions, beaming farmers, etc. are potent complements to verbiage.

▸ Remember to obtain permission before photos, stories and quotes with names go public.

▸ Presentation matters! Visually attractive, eye-catching material goes a long way. That said, slick graphics that appeal to Gen X farmers might not speak to older farmers and landowners. Consider all audiences for your website and other presentations.

▸ Watch your language. It's so easy to slip into jargon and technical terms. And it's hard to resist filling a space with words that you *just know* will attract your targets. Usually, less is more. As one program staff put it, "use words your relatives can understand."

▸ Use words and terms that resonate with (and don't put off) the intended audience. Examples include *community, heritage, opportunity, stewardship,* and *landscape*. Rather than scare older farmers with ticking clocks and lost farms, try dignity-boosting messages about leadership and legacy.

▸ Be aware that some terms may be off-putting or unclear to some audiences—for example, *preservation, protection, retirement, tenure, family farm, organic, sustainable,* and *affordable*. The dating site analogy might seem cute to some and trivializing to others.

▸ Careful what you promise: convey hope and optimism but not guarantees. Present positive messages, like "we help solve problems" or "you will gain…"

B. DELIVERING YOUR MESSAGE

METHODS

Today, methods and gimmicks to market products and services are abundant. Social marketing (with its emphasis on greater social good) mimics commercial marketing in many respects. Two major categories are *web-based* and *non-web-based*. Often your website is the first point of entry. Experienced farm link programs emphasize that the site needs to be user-friendly, clear and functional.

Savvy website managers know the advantages of search engine optimization (SEO)—the process of increasing the quality and quantity of website traffic by increasing the visibility of a website or web page to users of a web search engine. Use your search engine or work with your website developer to learn more about SEO.

DELIVERING YOUR MESSAGE

Web-based methods

▸ Website/pages
▸ Videos, promotional
▸ Videos, instructional
▸ Social media, various
▸ Email (individuals, group)
▸ E-newsletters
▸ Google ad words; SEO
▸ Discussion groups, listservs
▸ Electronic versions of non-web-based methods

Non-web-based methods

▶ Earned media
▶ Flyers, brochures
▶ Event tabling
▶ Info-graphics
▶ Workshops/presentations
▶ Paper newsletters
▶ Purchased advertising
▶ Seeker, landowner tours
▶ Newspapers; press releases
▶ Word of mouth
▶ Direct mail

Beneficiaries

▶ Seekers
  ▶ Beginning farmers
  ▶ Established farmers
  ▶ Low-literacy/ESL farmers
  ▶ New American/refugee farmers
  ▶ Urban farmers
  ▶ Women farmers
  ▶ Farmers of color
  ▶ Military veteran farmers
▶ Transitioning farmers
  ▶ Recruiting successor
  ▶ Sale/lease
▶ Non-farming landowners
  ▶ Retired farmers
  ▶ Women
  ▶ Absentee
  ▶ Public
  ▶ Institutional/org's
  ▶ Investors
  ▶ Inheritors
  ▶ Other private
▶ Service providers (if you offer programs/
  services directly to them such as professional
  development)

Big decisions need to be made about the return on investment for any of these methods. Is event tabling the best use of time, when most people report finding out about their program on the Internet? On the other hand, personal engagement is a powerful hook that can have ripple effects.

Geography is a factor. Reaching local assessors for a mailing to farm property owners is a very different strategy than engaging private landowners across an entire state.

AUDIENCES

Think of two categories of target audiences for your marketing outreach: your beneficiaries (actual customers) and intermediaries—those who can reach your beneficiaries to promote your program. The message and the methods will be different depending on your target. Successful farm link programs use a combination of beneficiary and intermediary targets to get their word out. They note that intermediaries can carry a lot of water for your marketing campaign. It's important to build relationships with agriculture industry leaders so they understand what you do and will be happy to promote you.

Intermediaries

▸ Beginning farmer programs

▸ Trade/industry associations

▸ Farm org's/networks
  ▸ Organic/sustainable orgs
  ▸ Young/Beginning networks
  ▸ Farm Bureau/Farmers Union

▸ Extension

▸ USDA agencies

▸ State ag agencies

▸ Other ag service providers and Ag service provider networks

▸ Conservation districts

▸ Land trusts/conservation groups

▸ Local food groups

▸ Food policy councils

▸ Ag co-ops

▸ Real estate professionals

▸ Lenders

▸ Insurance agents

▸ Local government

Seekers are motivated. They are eager to solve their land access problems. They "just" need to learn about you. Transitioning farmers are less so; as a stereotype, they are more cautious and private. Typically older, they are less savvy about technology, and use it less. Non-farming landowners are a mix. Often they are not engaged; they have to be found, engaged and coaxed to participate. Some may be enthusiastic, but uninformed.

You likely have other audiences. You may be looking to educate the general public. You might want to influence policymakers and attract funders. As this guide explores in **Section IX**, you will likely want to build strong connections with other agricultural service providers

and engage your networks. For these audiences, you will modify your pitch based on what you want them to know about you and what you want them to do.

❓ **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

5 **What is your elevator pitch?**

6 **Check a few farm link websites, thinking like a beneficiary, and then like an intermediary: which ones attract you and why?**

7 **What intermediaries will promote your program?**

✓ **EXAMPLES**

▸ The **Hudson Valley Farm Link Network** is a partnership of 17 organizations coordinated by American Farmland Trust. HVFN hosts the Hudson Valley Farmland Finder website, trainings, and 1:1 TA, and serves as a go-to resource for farmers and landowners. "We've found that having partners and others share links on their websites and in their outreach, such as online newsletters has been very effective."

▸ **Land For Good's Land Access Project**, Phases I and II, was a six-state collaborative of over 40 organizational and agency partners and over 200 outreach targets.

VIII. FUNDING AND HOSTING

A. BUDGETS

Budget data on farm link programs is, well, limited. Among national clinic participants, the reported annual range is $3,000 to over $1 million. A few reported "no budget" or "no information available." Recall that this range reflects a fruit basket of offerings, from simple online classified ads to a full-throated suite of **core**, **wrap-around** and **supporting** activities.

Teasing out exact costs of operating a farm link program can be challenging because labor, website, travel and marketing expenses, for example, may be integrated with an organization's other programmatic elements.

B. SOURCES OF FUNDS & FUNDING CHALLENGES

"Land link programs are notoriously hard to fund because they involve so much capacity and there are relatively very few matches that occur."[12] Setting aside the controversial "match" benchmark, most farm link programs agree that funding is a huge challenge.

Farm link programs are supported by a variety of funding sources. Of 30 surveyed programs in the North Central region[13], 11 were or are funded by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) competitive grant program, and 8 by the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, also based on competitive granting. The farm link clinic survey revealed a predominance of federal grant and philanthropic support. Ten reported state or local government

funding. Without more information, no conclusion can be drawn about the sustainability of government support. But the tenuousness of grants and donations is obvious. Grant writing is laborious to say the least, as is soliciting donations. The odds of success increase with understandable language, persuasive data, and evocative stories. Hence the need for all three.

A few programs charge fees for registering as a seeker or landowner on a posting site. Opinions vary as to the trade-offs of fees. Payers may feel they are investing in something of value. On the other hand, fees may discourage limited resource seekers from signing up. From an administrative point of view, carefully examine the gain from charging fees (for posting a property or profile, attend an event or receive TA) against the labor and other expenses required to administer a fee system.

As a supplement or replacement to service fees, many organizations have a membership and/or donation fundraising strategy. Seekers and owners may be targets for membership and donations; defining when and how they would be approached for membership and donation is a conversation to have with development staff.

A few programs are considering soliciting sponsorship via purchased advertising by the agricultural industry sector. Surely inputs suppliers, ag lenders, and equipment companies would want to support programs that foster their future customers. Those that have gone this route report disappointing results, especially weighed against the effort. But don't rule it out.

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12 Pillen and Hinrichs, 2014.

13 Valliant et al., 2019.

C. PROGRAM HOSTS

Data on farm link program entities is limited. One 2014 assessment of link programs in the Northeast U.S.[14] revealed that of seventeen programs participating in the research, 47% were housed in nonprofit organizations. Thirty-two percent were "organized in land trusts" [sic]. Since most land trusts are nonprofits, one would conclude that the researcher's nonprofit organization category is comprised of organizations other than land trusts, such as farmer support or training organizations. Sixteen percent were sponsored by government entities and 5% (one program?) was based in a university's extension system. 2019 research into farm link programs in the North Central US region showed over 60% resided in nonprofits, 17% in Extension/land grant university, and 10% in a state department of agriculture.

> ### ❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS
>
> 1 **What is your current or proposed budget? What amount would be ideal?**
>
> 2 **Where is your program/service housed? How is that working out?**
>
> 3 **Where do or will you get your funding? Where could you get more? How could you make your program more sustainable?**

IX. BUILDING ESSENTIAL TEAMS & NETWORKS

Farm entry and transfer are two of the biggest challenges in U.S. agriculture today. Farm link programs are essential to addressing these challenges, but they (you) cannot do it alone. No farm link program—even the most comprehensive and well-resourced—presumes to do it all, nor do any have all the necessary know-how. It takes teams and networks covering a wide range of expertise. Figuring out where your program fits, who else is doing what and how to leverage other resources will greatly influence your success and the success of your beneficiaries.

A. WHO DOES WHAT?

Your program will interact with different kinds of networks. One category is *service provider team players*. These are professionals and programs outside your program that have *expertise directly related to your services.* You would *bring them in* to work as a team with you and the farm seeker, transitioning farm family or non-farming landowner client you are assisting. For example, if you determine that a young farm seeker is ready to access land, you might bring in a lender and an attorney as you help her hone in on a suitable property to lease.

Another type of network is comprised of *service provider partners*. These individuals and organizations offer complementary programming, refer people to your program, promote your work, and offer local knowledge and general support. You would *refer out* to another provider and pass your customer off to them (rather than bring the provider into the service team). For example, you might determine with a young farm seeker that she would be better off getting clearer on her farming enterprise before attempting to acquire land. You'd refer her to a beginning farmer business planner or planning

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14 Pillen and Hinrichs, 2014.

course. In another case if your program does not provide farm succession coaching (most farm link programs don't) you could refer the farmer to consultants or programs in your area that do. As part of its succession planning process, the family might come back to you later to post a succession opportunity on your website.

WORKING WITH YOUR NETWORKS

Provider Team Players

‣ Attorneys--real estate, estate planning, contract law
‣ Farm financial advisors
‣ Appraisers (land, business, easement)
‣ Lenders
‣ Accountants/tax planners
‣ Land use/conservation specialists (incl. GIS)
‣ Mediators/State programs
‣ Land access educators

Provider Partners

‣ Beginning farmer and incubator programs
‣ State agencies
‣ Farm support and trade organizations
‣ Succession and estate planners
‣ Business development entities
‣ Planning and economic development commissions
‣ Land trusts
‣ Extension
‣ Lenders
‣ USDA state beginning farmer coordinators

There's no easy way to develop your service network; it takes effort and patience. Some states have beginning farmer provider networks, ag law chapters, and/or state-sponsored stables of farm business consultants. Some areas have searchable provider websites, such as the **Farm Transfer Network of New England**. Many websites have resource and service provider directories. (Is your program included on those sites??) Some established farm link organizations have formal or informal lists of

go-to providers such as attorneys or farm-knowledgeable CPAs. In some states, organizations and firms offer succession planning services that include further referrals. For example, Nationwide Insurance has a **'Land As Your Legacy'** suite of succession planning resources.

Networks fill in where farm link programs and staff don't have the capacity or expertise. That's why your networks are so important. Knowing your limits and making good referrals are crucial. And good referrals depend on your awareness of who's doing what, and some assessment of others' capacity, competence and willingness to partner with you.

Other considerations that farm link programs have raised include:

‣ Take advantage of existing networks, but consider developing your own "stable" of experts, based on what you need and who can fill in your gaps.

‣ Referral cautions: This comes up often. Should a program refer someone to a particular attorney? Is it okay to give a transitioning farmer names of several appraisers?

‣ Cooperation, coordination and competition: This work is too important to get hung up on who takes credit, but such tensions do arise. Competition for funding is real, and redundancy should be avoided. Collegiality is essential. It also helps to have regular communication and, in some cases, formal agreements for how you will work together, such as an MOU.

‣ Program gaps: In most regions, there aren't enough well-versed attorneys for this work, especially around farm succession and the less traditional land tenure strategies such as cooperative tenure and affordability add-ons. Some areas don't have enough farm or easement appraisers. Some programs can't find translators.

‣ Engage providers and strengthen networks through programming such as network conferences, professional development events and co-

presentations. For example Maine Farmland Trust, the host of Maine Farm Link, hosts an annual land access and transfer conference. Land For Good conducts professional training seminars for attorneys, and for realtors.

✔ EXAMPLES

▸ The **Hudson Valley Farm Link Network** (NY) is a consortium of 17 organizations that offers partner grants to participating organizations to provide on the ground TA to farmers and landowners in 13 counties.

▸ The **Farmland Access Hub** is a network of providers in MN, WI, and IA that "provide[s] new farmers with an integrated, supportive process to help them gain affordable and secure access to farmland." Hub partners sponsor events and link to Navigators—staff that work directly with farm seekers.

▸ The **New England Farm Link Collaborative** is a partnership of land link programs that cover six states (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT). It oversees **New England Farmland Finder**, produces educational materials and collaborates on professional trainings.

▸ **PCC Farmland Trust** is the coordinating partner for the Working Farmland Partnership. It took more than 6 months to build the partnership structure and communications systems. A lot of the work was navigating funding and moving from competition to coordination. Now that it's established, they "are seeing a huge benefit to our land-matching program. More farmers and landowners are using the site and we've expanded the types of services we can provide. It was worth the time we put in and more, but it doesn't happen overnight. This work takes time and capacity."

▸ **Farm Pathways** is a collaborative partnership between Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Organic Growers School, and WNC FarmLink to provide a full suite of farmer training including secure access to land. The three nonprofit organizations work together to create Farm Pathways through agricultural land conservation, farm training and mentoring, and connecting farmers to viable farmland.

▸ **LFG's Land Access Projects I and II**: A collaborative of over 40 organizations and agencies that worked on tasks forces, produced materials, delivered workshops and provided advising teams on land access and farm transfer.

B. CONNECTING AND ADVOCATING FOR FARM LINK PROGRAMS

All this may seem overwhelming. When you're obsessing about the checkbox categories in your seeker application or your workshop handouts, it's hard to keep your eyes on the prize. Farm link programs are proud of our accomplishments and eager to defend against critiques of our effectiveness. As this guide stresses, one of the best ways to do that is to boldly assert what your program does, with compelling language and clear expectations. Despite the broad recognition of the term, "farm link" isn't a movement. To date there's no national organization of link programs, no certification protocol. At this point, we don't need a formal structure to make our voices heard, or to advocate around our common cause.

We have much to learn about the issues and from each other. All programs can benefit from sharing resources. We can revel in our variety and also gain strength from our commonalities. We can develop shared language to gain more widespread recognition, and a shared agenda around needed public policies and resources.

Here are a few existing and potential opportunities to strengthen and advocate for our issues and programs:

▸ Land For Good's national farm link clinic was the first event of its kind, and participants hope it will not be the last.

▸ Farm link clinic participants would like an online repository of relevant resources.

▸ **American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center** has a listing of farm link programs. As with all such lists, it's hard to keep them accurate and up to date.

▸ **National Young Farmers Coalition also posts a list of farm link programs**.

▸ Farm link programs gain visibility by presenting at conferences such as those sponsored by the Extension Risk Management Education Program, and beginning farmer, farm viability, and agricultural trade conferences.

▸ We can work with advocacy organizations to influence state and federal policies. For example, some farm link programs worked with the **National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC)** to revise the **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program** to strengthen land access and transfer as statutory priorities in the 2018 Farm Bill. The USDA's Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers formed a subcommittee on land tenure and access, which included numerous recommendations pertinent to farm link programs.

▸ We can take a broad systems approach and look for opportunities to help people connect the dots between land access, local and regional food, climate, environmental stewardship and community economic development, for example. We can promote our issues with food policy councils, state and local food plan developers, and land trust coalitions.

▸ We can partner with researchers and data geeks. Ask questions and seek information from USDA, and land grant universities. Become familiar with the **Census of Agriculture** and the **TOTAL** (Tenure, Ownership and Transition of Agricultural Land) survey, for example.

❓ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 **Where does your program/service fit?**

2 **Map your networks. Conduct a strategic assessment. Where do and can you connect, and for what objectives?**

3 **How do you work with other providers?**

4 **What can you do to advocate for your farm link-related issues?**

Farm link programs are here to stay. As we learn more about them, and from each other, our programs will strengthen and improve. We'll be better able to communicate effectively about their value and how they fit into the larger system. We are responding well to rapidly increasing demand for information and assistance around farm access and transfer, and filling major service gaps.

Farm link programs are essential to address agricultural sustainability, opportunity, legacy and stewardship in the U.S. Pioneer and fledgling programs alike are meeting their substantial challenges and truly making a difference. This guide is a tribute to the programs and people who have worked so hard in this space, and hopefully an encouragement to all. Thank you.

GLOSSARY

Agricultural service provider
an individual, organization, firm or agency that offers programs and services to current and prospective operators, their families, employees and laborers.

Beneficiary
a user of your programs and services.

Coach
a professional who guides a process that aims to improve performance or produce desired results.

Connect
broadly, methods to bring seekers and owners together; synonymous with link. More specifically in this guide, to inform seekers and owners about parties/properties of interest based on compatibility criteria.

Consultant
a person who provides expert advice professionally.

Entry, exit
in agriculture, these terms refer to operators who start to farm and those who quit or retire from farming, with the associated issues and challenges.

Estate planning
one component of succession/transfer/transition that focuses on the disposition of one's wealth and assets upon death. Estate planning often includes related legal end-of-life directives.

Facilitator
a person who helps people move through a process toward what they wish to accomplish by providing indirect or unobtrusive assistance, guidance or supervision; does not need subject expertise.

Heirs' property
refers to land that has been passed down informally (without a will), resulting in land owned "in common" by all of the heirs.

Intermediary
in this guide, a group or network that can promote your programs and services to potential beneficiaries.

Link
a general description of methods to connect seekers and owners.

List/post/posting
to upload a property or seeker to a farm link site; an uploaded property.

Match
a facilitated transaction between a *specific* seeker and a *specific* owner.

Mediator
a professional who guides parties to resolve a dispute.

Non-operator landowner (NOLO)
an individual, group or entity that owns farmland but is not an operator. Also known as non-farming landowners, about 80% of farm landlords are NOLOs.

Operator, operation
terms used by USDA for the producer (farmer or rancher) and the agricultural business.

Owner
a person, group or entity that owns or represents the owners of a farm property. Owners can be farmers, retiring or retired farmers, farm families, inheritors, organizations, public entities, and private companies.

Posting
an available property uploaded to a farm link website; could also be a farm seeker.

Profile
a description of a farm seeker uploaded to a farm link website.

Register
To submit an application to post a property or profile to a farm link website

Seeker
a prospective, beginning or established farmer looking for a farm or farmland.

Transfer, succession, transition
often used synonymously, referring to the passing of income, assets and management from the current operator to a family or unrelated party.

User
anyone who visits a farm link site; may or may not be registered.

Technical assistance
the transmission of information, expertise, instruction, and/or skills, usually through a formal arrangement.

LAND FOR GOOD RESOURCES

How to Create Effective Online Property Postings for Farm Link Websites
User-friendly step-by-step instruction on creating a posting that will attract farm seekers, by the New England Farm Link Collaborative. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/NEFF-How-to-create-effective-online-property-postings-for-farm-link-websites.pdf

New England Farm Link Program Guide
Explains types of services provided by New England farm link programs, with generally useful descriptions and definitions. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Team-Approach-To-Farm-Transfer-Planning.pdf

Farm Access Methods Guide
An organized and practical approach to understanding methods to access land, based on three basic options. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Farm-Access-Methods-Guide.pdf

Farm Access Methods decision tool
A companion to the Farm Access Methods Guide, this tool also stands alone as a decision tree showing arrangements and who might be involved. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Farm-Access-Decision-Tool.pdf

Successful Farm Transfer Planning for Farmers without an Identified Successor
A focus on the unique challenges of finding and working with a non-family successor. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Farm-Transfer-Planning-Without-An-Identified-Successor-Handbook.pdf

A Team Approach to Farm Transfer Planning Assistance
A cross-discipline look at the elements of farm transfer planning, the roles of providers and building effective transfer planning assistance teams. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Team-Approach-To-Farm-Transfer-Planning.pdf

A Landowners Guide to Leasing Land for Farming
A comprehensive and user-friendly guide that addresses understanding the land, landowner-tenant agreements and relationships, tax and legal considerations and stewardship guidelines. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Landowners-Guide-To-Leasing-To-A-Farmer-Handbook.pdf

Leasing Land to Farmers: A Handbook for New England Land Trusts, Municipalities and Institutions
A comprehensive walk-through of leasing considerations, lease types and samples, and a great checklist. http://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/LFG-Leasing-Land-To-Farmers-For-Land-Trusts-Municipalities-Handbook.pdf

Changing Lands, Changing Hands 2017 conference report: Successful and Innovative Programs, Practices and Policy
A compilation of ideas on farm and ranch access, tenure and transfer from over 200 presenters and participants. http://landforgood.org/our-work/changing-lands-changing-hands/report/

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PARTICIPATING PROGRAMS & ORGANIZATIONS
IN THE 2019 NATIONAL FARM LINK CLINIC

Location	Program Name	Host Organization
AR	no current program	Northwest Arkansas Land Trust
CA	California FarmLink	California FarmLink
CO	Colorado Land Link	Guidestone Colorado
CT	Connecticut Farmlink	Connecticut Department of Agriculture, Office of Farmland Protection
IA	no name	Sustainable Iowa Land Trust
IA	Ag Link- Beginning Farmer Center	Iowa State University
IA	Find a Farmer	Practical Farmers of Iowa
IL	Northeast Illinois FarmLink	Liberty Prairie Foundation
IL	The Land Connection	The Land Connection
MI	Farmer to Farmer	Leelanau Conservancy
MN	Farmland Access Hub	Renewing the Countryside
MN	MN Farm Link	MN Department of Agriculture
MT	Farm Link Montana	Farm Link Montana
Nat'l	no current program	American Farmland Trust
NC	NC Farm Link	North Carolina State University
ND	no current program	FARRMS Farm Beginnings (Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resource Management and Sustainability)
NEW ENGLAND	New England Farmland Finder	Land For Good & partners
NJ	NJ Farm Link	State Agriculture Development Committee
NY	Farmland for a New Generation NY	AFT
NY	Hudson Valley Farmlink Network	American Farmland Trust & Partners
NY	CLC Farmer-Landowner Match Program	Columbia Land Conservancy
OH	Begin Farming Program/Land Access Program	Ohio Ecological Food & Farming Association
OH	CountrySide FarmLink	Countryside Conservancy
OR	iFarm Oregon	Friends of Family Farmers
VT	Vermont Land Link	The Intervale Center
WA	Farm to Farmer	PCC Farmland Trust
Canada	B.C. Land Matching Program	Young Agrarians