

“Exploring the Small Farm Dream”

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Kate Hayes

Note: The names of individuals mentioned in this article have been changed to respect the promise of confidentiality that we make to all participants in our Explorer courses.

When we first met Sarah in Fall 2003, she had been raising sheep on her farm in the hills of Western Massachusetts for ten years. A weaver and chef, Sarah’s sheep raising activities were primarily a labor of love, rather than a source of her family income. Having been recently laid off from one of her “day jobs,” Sarah thought it would be a good time to explore the potential to expand her sheep operation into a serious business. To that end, Sarah enrolled in our course, *Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting an Agricultural Business Right for You?*

The New England Small Farm Institute has been offering its “Explorer” course since Fall 2000. After several years of enrolling beginning farmers in the 10-session NxLevel™ course *Tilling the Soil of Opportunity*, we realized that many of them were not ready to take advantage of a course that had as its objective, a fully realized business plan. Most of the people coming to the class were actually “pre-venture,” and had not yet made the decision to farm commercially. So we developed a shorter course that would help people ask and answer the important questions necessary to make such a decision wisely.

Those questions include: Why do I want to farm as a business? What quality of life issues are important to me? Could I satisfy my interest in agriculture in other ways? Does my family support my plans? What skills and knowledge do I already have to help me succeed in operating a farm business? What skills and knowledge do I need to acquire and how will I go about that? How large of a “paycheck” do I need from my farm venture? How long can I wait until my farm produces the income I need? Will I always need off-farm income to supplement or even help support the farm operations? What physical and financial resources do I have now to start my farm business and what do I need to acquire? Where will I farm and what will I produce? How will I market my products or services? How likely is it that I will be able to produce and sell enough to meet my financial goals?

After asking these and many related questions, and analyzing their responses, course participants decide whether starting a small farm business is right for them. Based on their decision, they then develop an action plan for the next 6-12 months to either move their small farm dream forward, or go in another direction.

An action plan might in fact include developing a full business plan. That was Sarah’s conclusion. She decided that a farm business was right for her and that she was ready to more fully examine the viability of her ideas to formalize and expand her farm operations through the process of writing a business plan. However, Sarah’s situation is unusual among our *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* participants. For one thing, Sarah has land for her farm. That means she can evaluate potential farm enterprises based both on the particular piece of land she will farm and the particular market opportunities (or challenges) that her location presents.

For the majority of “Explorers” access to land has been the deterrent in moving ahead with their desire to farm commercially in our region. This was certainly the case for Mark and Linda, a couple who attended our first *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* course. Through the course they decided that they did want to change careers and become farmers, and they set clear goals about the type of farm they

wanted and the type of community in which they wanted to raise their future family. (Engaged to be married at the time, Mark and Linda declared the course the best pre-marriage counseling they could have hoped for!) However, after searching for land throughout New England for several years without finding affordable property that met both their farming and quality of life goals, Mark and Linda have put their small farm dream on hold for now. In the meantime, these teachers continue to gain hands-on experience by spending their summers working on other farms.

For a variety of reasons, about fifty percent of our Explorer course participants to date have decided to defer their small farm dreams. Finding an appropriate place to farm is often the reason, but just as often it is because they decide to continue working their current jobs to save more money for start-up capital. Or, like Caroline, they decide to acquire more farming skills. Caroline, a computer programmer, was quite convinced after the course that she wanted to have her own farm business, but realized that she needed considerably more practical farming experience before launching her own venture. So, recently she arranged to spend a year working on a farm in her native Philippines where she hopes eventually to relocate.

Like Caroline, most of our participants have been in the general workforce for a number of years. While lacking farming experience, many come to the course with considerable management or marketing experience, and are encouraged to discover that those business skills can be transferred to a farm enterprise. After taking the course Wayne and Mary, for example, used such skills to organize a farmers market in their town. Not only did they provide a community service in this town that is experiencing significant population growth, but they created a reliable market outlet for their fledgling vegetable operation as well.

Of course, some “Explorers” decide by the end of the course that starting an agricultural business is *not* right for them. We are happy to think that the investment in a four-session course might save some people from investing many thousands of dollars in a business venture that does not suit their needs. For some like Suzie, the decision comes down to being unwilling to trade the relative financial security of having a job for the uncertainties of self-employment. For others like Harry and Marsha, it is realizing that they are very happy raising food for themselves, but do not wish to have the added responsibility of raising food for others and operating as a formal business. And for others like John, it is understanding that what is important for him is working *for* agriculture, not *in* agriculture. John subsequently went to work for a service provider that helps farmers transition to organic practices

Since Fall 2000 the New England Small Farm Institute has held seven *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* courses in Massachusetts with more than 90 participants. (NOFA New Jersey also held a course in Fall 2003 and other organizations in the Northeast are expected to offer the course in the future.) We are always amazed and pleased by the number of people who are considering starting full or part-time small farm businesses and the number of people interested in taking the course. The course workbook is also available for self-study so many people ask us why the course itself is so popular. One of reasons is regularly reported in the course evaluations: participants value the opportunity to explore the small farm option in a group of peers. As Michael said so eloquently at the end of one class, “I really thought I was crazy to even be considering starting a small farm business. It’s been wonderful to know that there are others out there with the same ideas!”

For more information on the Exploring the Small Farm Dream course and workbook, visit the Explorer website <www.smallfarm.org/explorer>, e-mail the Explorer Program at <explorer@smallfarm.org>, or contact program staff at (413) 323-4531.