

# A publication of **Growing New Farmers**

**A northeast service providers consortium**  
GNF Professional Development Series #205



**Program:** Land Link Vermont  
**Organization:** University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture  
**Targeted to:** Startups, Re-strategizers, Establishers  
**Dates:** Started 1998, ongoing.

## **Need**

Access to farmland and farming opportunities is one barrier new farmers face. Many are not raised on farms so do not have access to family farmland.

In the Northeast where land prices are steadily rising and development is slowly reducing the amount of available farmland, finding an affordable farm to buy can be a serious challenge for beginning farmers. Sale of development rights and PDR (purchase of development rights) programs have helped some new farmers acquire farmland at a reasonable price. Private and public funding for these programs is limited and land trusts who hold the rights may not be interested in smaller land parcels desired by many new entrants.

These situations directly impact and create concerns about the vitality of Vermont's rural communities and the sustainability of its working landscape.

Given the high start-up costs of some farm businesses, purchasing a farm is not the best first step in starting an agricultural business.

Those new farmers who hope to take over a family farm someday face slightly different, although significant, challenges. When attempting an intra-family farm transfer, new farmers and their families must ensure the ongoing viability of the farm, maintain positive family relationships and communicate both farm business and family goals.

## **Program Development**

To address these needs, the Center for Sustainable Agriculture created Land Link Vermont in 1998. It is modeled after similar linking programs begun in the Midwest following the 1980s' farm crisis when poor economic conditions resulted in a mass exodus from farming. Central to linking programs is making connections between new and experienced farmers to pass on knowledge, farming skills, and agricultural business assets.

## **Goals**

Land Link Vermont connects beginning and relocating farmers with farmland and farming opportunities in Vermont and helps participants make informed decisions about

farm start-up and transfer issues.

To achieve these goals, the program provides three services:

**1. The Matching Service** provides the linkages between farm seekers and farmland owners. Interested parties complete an application form that includes information on goals, acreage, location, enterprises, and tenure options. The program enters this information into a relational database, which is shared with seekers and owners.

To date, more than 450 farmers and farmland owners have participated in the Matching Service. Participants are interested in a variety of transfer options including buy/sell, lease, and joint farming.

Farm seekers have expressed interest in a number of enterprises including dairy, vegetables, maple, small ruminants (sheep and goats), and herbs.

**2. Education** through publications and workshops provides farmers, landowners and agricultural professionals with links to information on farm start-up and farm succession issues. Most of the educational activities are offered in collaboration with other organizations like Extension and other non-profits.

Topics addressed thus far include farm transfer planning, effective leases, farm financing, business planning, financial literacy, and direct marketing.

**3. Consultation and referrals** help link farmers and landowners to service professionals (ie. attorneys, accountants and realtors) and Vermont agricultural organizations. Because no two farms and no two-farm families are alike, addressing individual needs is critical to success.

Through collaboration with existing agencies and programs, Land Link Vermont helps connect farmers to a wide variety of expertise on business management, legal issues, agricultural production, retirement and estate planning, and marketing.

## **Funding**

Although the program is housed at the University of Vermont, Land Link Vermont relies almost exclusively on external sources for funding. Past funding for the program has come from the Freeman Foundation, Vermont Land Trust, the John Merck Fund, the Friendship Fund, the Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation, Robison Foundation, Wendling Foundation, UVM College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, individual donations, and program fees.

## **Partners**

A central role of the Center for Sustainable Agriculture is to establish working collaborations among the university, agencies and organizations, farms, and communities to promote sustainable farming systems. To that end, Land Link Vermont has sought partnerships when developing programs.

On-going partners include the following: University of Vermont Extension, Vermont Land Trust, and Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. We have also partnered with the Intervale Foundation, National Farm Transition Network, New England Small Farm Institute, Natural Resource Conservation Districts, Vermont Farm Bureau, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, Vermont Farms! Association, Vermont Food Venture Center, Women's Agricultural Network, and others.

## **Outreach**

To expand the program's effectiveness, the Center hired two part-time outreach assistants – Vermont farmers: Herman Buzeman of Addison and Dexter Randall of North Troy – for Land Link Vermont in April 2000. Both farmers have been active in the agricultural community for more than 30 years, and are currently working on intra-family transfers on their own farms.

Their job is to meet with individuals and/or groups – particularly farm owners who seem to benefit from personal visits – to explain Land Link Vermont and its Matching Service.

Since Herman and Dexter have been on board, they have made more than 1000 contacts with farmers, agricultural professionals and service providers.

Land Link Vermont also has an Internet site: <http://www.uvm.edu/landlinkvt>. It includes a description of the program's services and application forms for the Matching Service. The website seems particularly useful to farm seekers and our program partners.

## **Successes**

To date, 800 farmers and others have attended workshops sponsored and co-sponsored by Land Link Vermont. Center staff have facilitated 16 farm matches, affecting 3,271 acres or \$5 million of estimated real estate value.

An example of a Land Link Vermont success story follows: A young couple with farming experience enrolled in the Matching Service. They attended a Land Link Vermont workshop where they developed a financial plan for their farm business.

After a couple of leads through the Matching Service, they met a non-farming landowner who shared a similar farming vision and was interested in leasing a farm to them. Through consultation with Center staff, the couple developed a set of questions and considerations, and they followed up on a referral to an attorney who helped them develop a lease agreement for the farm.

## **Challenges**

Land Link Vermont participants, staff and advisory committee members identified the following challenges for the program:

1. Many farm seekers lack adequate farm business experience. Too often, seekers come to the program in the aspiring and exploring stages without commercial farming experience that farm owners desire.
2. Cultural values about owning vs. accessing and controlling farmland hinder alternative tenure options.
3. There is a lack of on-site housing for farm seekers.
4. Many seekers and owners come to the program without an adequate transfer and/or business plan.
5. The unstable dairy economy is a stumbling block for both unrelated and intra-family transfers where one farm must provide multi-family incomes.
6. Land Link Vermont must have long-term, stable funding.

### **Next Steps**

As most linking programs recognize, the matching function alone, while essential, is not enough to ensure successful matches. Education and support are needed. To that end, Land Link Vermont is partnering with others interested in farm start-up and succession issues.

More than 10 organizations in the state have formed a working group to serve the needs of new farmers. The Center for Sustainable Agriculture staff has taken the lead in facilitating this group called Vermont New Farmer Network.

The New Farmer Network is first addressing the priority actions identified by farmers in a Beginning Farmer Forum held in February 2002. These include, among others:

- Coordinate existing beginning farmer programs.
- Provide new farmers with low interest loans or grants.
- Expand the availability of business training programs for new farmers
- Compile a new farmer resource packet.

To help farmers explore the full range of farm succession options, particularly alternatives to the purchase-and-sale model, Land Link Vermont is working with other organizations in the Growing New Farmer Consortium to develop written case studies. By providing farmers with success stories, it is expected that more farmers will make informed decisions about farm succession and, ultimately, successfully transfer their own farms to the next generation.

### **Additional Resources**

- Land Link Vermont website: [www.uvm.edu/landlinkvt](http://www.uvm.edu/landlinkvt)
- National Farm Transition Network:  
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/nftn/homepage.html>
- Vermont Land Trust: [www.vlt.org](http://www.vlt.org)
- New England Land Link: [www.smallfarm.org/nell](http://www.smallfarm.org/nell)

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