

The Lakeville Journal

Helping farmers find farmland

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The website www.Ctfarmlink.com is like a dating site without the romance. The goals are regional food security and keeping farmland productive.

Landowners and land seekers create profiles that articulate what they have to offer and what they are looking for, then they browse the playing field.

Connecticut Farmland Trust staff are available to help both parties in the potential relationship to think through their needs, navigate first meetings, and consider different types of legal agreements and programs.

Lily Orr of Connecticut Farmland Trust runs the site and finds that landowners in our region come to her with highly varied situations.

Some are farming families who want to protect the legacy of their farms after they transition out of careers in agriculture.

Others are non-farmers who have inherited or purchased land with agricultural potential. Farm seekers range from beginning farmers to established producers looking to expand their businesses.

Orr hopes that when families gather on their land this summer, conversations will include some thought about the long-term future of their land, including leasing or selling to a farmer. "Right now, www.ctfarmlink.org has only 75 landowners with land for lease or for sale but we have 260 farm seekers," Orr said. "The National Young Farmers Coalition has found that land access is the number one barrier for new farmers, and in Connecticut that's true as well."

With a 3:1 ratio of land seekers to landowners, Orr wants to help property owners understand how many resources exist in the state, to help them make their land available.

"We offer free site visits through the CT Farm Link program, during which consultants help landowners evaluate their property and think through what kind of resources and assistance they might be looking for.

"We can bring farm seekers out to the land and assess the suitability for their use. Will conversations continue from there? Do the parties need help making decisions about the land? Need help drafting a lease? Are they interested in conservation easements? We have partners and resources to help families navigate these questions."

Help with the details

Will O'Meara takes a similar approach as Connecticut's field agent for a nonprofit called Land for Good.

"We provide one-on-one consultation for farm seekers, farm families and non-farming landowners to provide solutions that create sound farm tenure for farmers in our state.

"We use a variety of tools to improve beginning farmers' access to land including developing lease agreements, facilitating farm transfer and succession, as well as educating and encouraging land owners to make their land available for farming."

Conservation scientist Kip Kolesinskas is one of the consultants who works with CT Farm Link.

"We have a lot of skilled, enthusiastic young farmers coming out of training experiences in the nearby states who see the market potential of starting a farm in northwest Connecticut but can't access land here."

Prices are too high for farms

Chelsea Gazillo works for American Farmland Trust, the same organization that puts out those "No Farms, No Food" bumper stickers.

"The challenge for agriculture in Litchfield County is that there isn't enough affordable farmland available for farmers," she said.

She sees the same pattern that Orr and Kolesinskas do in our region: untended potential farmland valued at real estate prices that price farmers out.

“According to the 2017 agricultural census the average price of farmland in Connecticut is \$12,400 per acre.”

Prices that high are out of sync with the budgets of most farmers.

CT Farmlink is a program of the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and is funded by the Community Investment Act. The Department of Agriculture contracts with Connecticut Farmland Trust, Land for Good, and the Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust, which works specifically in Litchfield County to help landowners and farmers connect in ways that meet the needs of both.

Gazillo is encouraged by the potential for further work toward farmland accessibility in Connecticut. “The Buy Protect Sell statute, which passed the Legislature in 2018, allows the Connecticut Department of Agriculture (DOA) to purchase land at its market value, put an agricultural easement on it, and then sell it to farmers at an agricultural value. The DOA is also committed to convening a farmland access working group this summer that would create a clearing house of the different policies and programs in the state that currently support farmland access and affordability, identify challenges around farmland access, and seek solutions.”

“The face of farming in our state is changing,” Kolesinskas said. “Traditionally, Litchfield County was dairy. Now we have people raising vegetables, using woodlots for mushrooms and everything in between. We have resources in the state like the Farmland Restoration Program that helps farmers invest in getting land back into food production. We hope people will find those of us in positions to help.”

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Gaining ground for farmers

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