



## Matching landless farmers, landowners

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HARLEMVILLE - There are landowners who pour a cup of coffee on Saturday morning, look out through a window over their quiet slice of Columbia County, and wish somebody would till some rows or tend some orchards.

There are farmers, 20- or 40-something, with ripening skills and passion, who have no trust fund and have no land.

Now somebody is trying to play matchmaker.

Saturday's Landings workshop, held at Hawthorne Valley Farm in Harlemville, was designed to match non-farming landowners and farmers in search of land. It was organized by the Glynwood Center, Land for Good and the Columbia Land Conservancy, as well as Hawthorne Valley.

It may seem foreign to Americans, who tend to associate a farmer with tending his or her own land. But around the world, land leasing is a most common farming practice, said Peter Paden, executive director of Columbia Land Conservancy.

Here in the U.S., too, land leasing by farmers has a history as old as abolition, when landowners and freed slaves reinvented the rules of engagement to keep the nation's soils productive.

But the tenant-landowner agreements of the past yielded stereotypes like those in Great Depression-era photographs of impoverished sharecroppers or characters in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." Abusive business practices by landowners left tenants forever in debt, straining to organize into groups like the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and press new regulations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the administration of FDR.

In stark contrast, modern partnerships between local farmers and landowners are rooted, primarily, in trust and common ethics.

Farmer Hugh Williams of Philmont told the crowd of several dozen gathered in the gym at Hawthorne Valley School that he and his partnering landowners "were drawn together." Unlike some farmers, who may farm their own property plus neighbors' land, Williams owns no land himself. He leases property from several area landowners to support his cattle herd, orchards and vegetable crops.

"Yet I don't think we were unique," Williams said. "There are a lot of landowners that want farmers, and a lot of farmers looking for land."

The relationship is primary - not the lease, said Jeff Sills, whose 95-head cattle herd and 400 acres of field crops span the properties of six Hillsdale landowners. In fact, dairy and beef farmer Matt Schober of Cool Whisper Farm in Harlemville described his lease agreements as "handshakes."

"The agreement is we're going to take of your land," Schober said. "We're going to do what we need to do - fertilize, rotate crops. We communicate about what we're going to do, and they tell us if there's something they don't want done."

Differences crop up over the long-term, inevitably, participants said. Landowners may have a strong vision that isn't the same as farmers'. Landowners Joe Haley of Ghent, Renate Reiss of Claverack, Allan Shope of Amenia and Frederick Schwarz Jr. of New York City (who owns land in Taghkanic) expressed what motivated them to seek out farmers.

Some wanted to preserve habitat for native species, historic integrity or family tradition. Others prioritized keeping their land open and productive.

The challenge in the tenant-landowner relationship is both parties need a certain degree of control, participants said. But success comes when differences are trumped by mutually deep concern for the land.

"I had a commitment to the profession. They had a commitment to stewardship. We developed a strong, mutual respect and admiration," Williams said.

Leasing agreements vary, but most draw some distinction between lines of equity. Infrastructure belongs predominantly to landowner, while agricultural base belongs to farmer.

Leases generally release landowners from liability arising from farmers' activities. Yet they give the farmer autonomy to do his or her work and avoid overly-specific requirements for what the farm will look like or produce over time, since the farm is a living organism that must be allowed the flexibility to evolve.

Some landowners collect a monthly fee or a percentage of farmers' profits. Others - like Shope, who is both a farmer himself and a leasing landowner - collect nothing, outside of an agricultural tax exemption gained from keeping land productive.

Dave Llewellyn, head gardener at Glynwood, said new farmers looking for tenant relationships are an important part of revitalizing the regional food economy.

And for older farmers looking to preserve their land and labor, landless farmers may be their chance to nurture a younger generation who in turn will nurture their land.

"I don't think there's anything an old farmer likes better than an enthusiastic young farmer," Sills said.

Columbia Land Conservancy is developing a match making database. Interested landowners or farmers can reach them at 518-392-5252.

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