

Toward a new Homestead Act: Designing a farmstead transfer and leasing program for high-value farming and farmstead preservation

Abstract: Finding ways to make farming more accessible for would-be farmers involves working with existing landowners and potential tenants/buyers to educate both groups on the possibilities open to them. Surveys, focus groups and personal interviews were used to determine what tactics would be more effective in engaging both groups.

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According to the research for this project, more familiarity with small-scale farming options and alternatives, and creation of low-risk ways for new farmers to prove their abilities, sincerity and prospects for making a profit.

What was done and why?

The guiding vision for this project is an Iowa agricultural landscape that is more diverse in size of farm, age of farmer, gender and ethnicity of farmer, marketing strategy, and livestock and crop varieties in production. The long-term goal is to increase the opportunities for beginning farmers to access land with a house and outbuildings (i.e., a farmstead) suitable for small-scale, value-added, diversified agricultural production. The short- and medium-term goals are to identify and implement a strategy, rooted in the attitudes and motivations of landowners, beginning farmers and other stakeholders, to facilitate the transfer (through sale or lease) of farmstead-scale parcels to beginning farmers of diverse backgrounds who have a strong desire to engage in small-scale, high-value agriculture.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Complete a study and report on landowner and beginning farmer motivations to engage in a process of preserving and transitioning farmsteads, the results of which will be used to inform a multi-stakeholder planning process,
2. Engage at least 16 stakeholders (representing a wide range of expertise and experience relevant to farmland access) in a planning process that generates a comprehensive set of recommendations for farmstead transition in Iowa, and
3. Disseminate the report/recommendations to local and state government, agricultural and educational organizations and other stakeholder groups, and evaluate project effectiveness.

What did we learn?

This planning process helped the steering committee (PI and co-PI team) and several key stakeholders to think strategically about programming to connect beginning farmers with farmstead landowners. This research reinforced the notion that no simple, straightforward process exists to find land owned by an older person or recent inheritor who may be in a position to sell it, but has not yet put it on the market. Recommendations focused on strategically connecting the metro-area farmstead owners (who are interested in supporting new farmers) with beginning, small-scale, diversified farmers.



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