

FARMING & FUTURE GENERATIONS

Farms, Food Security & Future Generations



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Trent Watts grew up on a rural farm on the Prairies. His grandfather's brother, (both brothers were homesteaders) lived nearby on a half-section – a portion of which had never been under the plough.

Trent often visited “Uncle Tom”. He has vivid memories of ice-skating on the big slough, looking for beavers with his cousin, and revelling in the sight of thousands and thousands of prairie flowers.

“Somehow that seeps into your soul and becomes a part of who you are. You don't know it is happening at the time,” Trent says. “It informs a lot of what is still important in my life today.”

In the early 1970s, Uncle Tom died and, to Trent's surprise, left him the farm in his will.

At first Trent rented it out for a few years. The kids liked to visit the farm, but he knew their future interests were not in farming. Nevertheless the farm was often on his mind, especially with those vivid childhood memories.

“I was thinking about the future. I really wanted the land to be farmed in a sustainable way, in perpetuity, and in a way that would preserve – as much as possible – the native plants and history of the land,” Watts says.

Trent discovered Farmland Legacies, a registered charity based on the Prairies that holds agricultural land in trust and values sustainability. Farmland Legacies acquires arable land through donation

or bequests, and leases the land to farmers who share their commitment to regenerative agricultural practices and who will act as stewards of the land.

As a land trust, Farmland Legacies is able to offer stable, long-term leases to individuals or families. Potential leaseholders are evaluated on their agricultural background, aspirational goals and financial need.

Trent talked to his family. He explained he was thinking of transferring title of the land to Farmland Legacies. The farm would not only be protected, but continue operating as farmland by future generations of tenants.

“We all went to the farm, walked it as much as we could so that everyone understood what was going to happen. It was about being a good steward. We went ahead with gifting the farm to Farmland Legacies. It has been one of the best decisions we ever made.”

Hurdles on the Horizon for Sustainable Farming in Canada

Across Canada there are significant challenges around affordable land access for food production, especially for a new generation of farmers. The global COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on community food security.

Over the next seven years, well over 50% of farmers in Canada will retire. Yet the most recent Census of Agriculture (2016) revealed only one in twelve

farmers has a formal succession plan.

As this ‘wave’ of farmers retire in the near future, large amounts of farmland will presumably change hands. Who will purchase this farmland? What will it be used for?

There are many questions for farm families to answer, such as:

- Are the children going to stay on the farm?
- If so, should complete ownership be transferred to the children?
- How will management decisions be made?
- Is real estate development and speculation encroaching on nearby land?

Adding to the difficulties is the increased trend for children who grew up on farms to move away. Many no longer want to carry on their family's farming tradition. But most soon-to-retire farmers want to see the land for which they have worked so hard, continue to be farmed.

Advisors have an important role in supporting farmland owners to achieve their goal of permanently protecting their farmland for sustainable long-term agricultural uses.

Land access is the most significant barrier for aspiring young farmers

While this disquieting scenario unfolds for so many farmers about to retire, across Canada today there is a groundswell of young people committed to sustainable local food production.

But aspiring young farmers face a host

of problems, including;

- Access to long-term tenured land.
- Lack of capital to purchase land and/or build infrastructure.
- A steep rise in the value of farmland (Since 2007, farmland prices have increased by 132%. [Farm Credit Canada]).
- Speculation and development compound the problem by keeping land from being farmed sustainably.

Even if young people can rent or lease land, these barriers may limit their ability to create equity and longer-term security.

Despite the barriers, many young people are still keen to farm

Formidable barriers aside, many young people are working creatively to encourage farming in an environmentally sustainable way. For example, Young Agrarians is a farmer-to-farmer resource network.

One of its most interesting programs – adapted from Quebec's ARTERRE – is the British Columbia Land Matching Program that connects new and experienced farmers across the country. Young Agrarians also provides workshops and training through events, mentorships and apprenticeships.

Forging New Ground with Alternative Land Access and Land Tenure Models

While major challenges in the farm sector apply across Canada, in BC the situation is even more difficult as less than 3% of BC's land is arable.

Rising real estate prices and land speculation over the past two decades have compounded the problem. Farmland is being bought up by pension funds and foreign investors. As stated in the Senate Report, "A Growing Concern".

These pressures have resulted in some of the most inspiring work being done to

ensure food security is taking place in BC, which is serving as models for other parts of the country.

Exploring New Models – Community Food Security

The Foodlands Cooperative of BC ("Foodlands") is a new model that supports community-owned land and shared ecological stewardship while recognizing, respecting and including Indigenous food systems.

Foodlands' goal – to place land in trust, to be managed by the community via Community Service Cooperatives – essentially removes arable land from the private market and ensures its availability for diverse farming, foraging and community-based agricultural activities.

Thus Foodlands addresses the problems of rising land values, non-farm use of farmland and speculation driven by market dynamics. It also works closely with Young Agrarians to assure new entrants into agriculture have long term tenure.

To achieve this goal, Foodlands Cooperative of BC seeks gifts of land and legacies of land. By holding land in trust, Foodlands provides a vehicle for current landowners to donate their properties and have peace of mind their land will provide food security for their local community in perpetuity, as well as helping farmers and community groups that are looking to support diversified, regenerative agriculture.

A niche is then created to protect land that doesn't otherwise fit within conservation trust mandates, in circumstances where individuals do not want to donate land to a public government body or where there is no municipal entity interested in holding and managing foodland in such a manner.

Farmland Easement Agreements

Farmland Easement Agreements are one of the tools used by the Ontario Farmland Trust in its mission to protect farmlands. Easement agreements ensure arable land is protected from development and are legally binding in perpetuity. In the words of one farmer who protected his family's farm using an easement agreement:

"I feel we owe it to future generations to ensure there is healthy agricultural land for farming. There is a history and connection here on our farm that I do not want to be lost. The farm is my family's legacy."

In Closing

A gift of farmland can be made outright during a donor's lifetime in their will, as a retained life estate or through various other agreements – often providing much-needed tax relief.

Gifts and legacies of farmland ensure land will be protected from development or speculation, help to maintain healthy ecosystems and ensure the land remains farmland for generations to come.

On a final note, let's return to the story about Trent Watts and the prairie farm he donated: Farmland Legacies has had the same tenants on the farmland since it was received nearly 20 years ago. Today, one of the sons of the tenants is also getting involved in stewarding the land, honouring the past, and securing the future.

Natasha van Bentum (CFRE 1996-2019), is a long-time outreach and legacy advisor to environmental organizations, conservation groups and foodland /land trusts. She is publisher of Green Legacies: A Donor's Guide and can be followed on Twitter @GiveGreenCanada.