

To Transfer Farm Estate: Communicate, Seek Advice, And Begin Early

ANDY ANDREWS
Lancaster Farming Staff
GAP (Lancaster Co.)

There are no "cookbook" recipes for passing on the farm, according to the director of a family farm transfer advocacy group.

But several things are critical, according to Marion L. Bowlan, executive director of Pennsylvania Farm Link: early planning for the transfer of the estate, open communication, and seeking the right legal advice.

Bowlan and several estate transfer planning experts spoke Wednesday to about 74 landowners and potential farm owners at the Passing On The Farm Workshop at the Gap Diner in Gap.

Bowlan quoted USDA statistics nationwide: the average net return for a typical farm is about \$23,000, which provides only marginal living. An even more striking statistic: though 90 percent of farms in Pennsylvania are owned by the family, only 30 percent are successfully transferred to the second generation, 15 percent to the third, and only 6 percent to the fourth.

Pennsylvania Farm Link, noted Bowlan, is a nonprofit organization in its third year of operation dedicated to creating farming opportunities for the next generation. The organization includes a board of directors assembled from farms, the

American Farmland Trust, Penn State Cooperative Extension, the state Grange, the state departments of agriculture and education, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, and other groups.

The program began as a way to link prospective younger farmers with those farmers who were retiring. But since then, services have been expanded to include an educational component and workshops to address the issues of family farm estate transfers.

A new apprentice program will involve a dozen farmers who volunteered to work with high school kids on educating and training the "next generation" about farming, Bowlan noted.

Bowlan said that according to 1997 statistics, 17 percent of farm operators are 70 years or older and only 8 percent are age 35 or under. Increasingly, programs such as Farm Link are needed to help the younger generation become involved in farming.

First, though, family and sibling issues need to be discussed. Family members need to talk openly about potential transfers before financial or legal consultants are brought into the picture.

Transferring the farm involves three universal decisions: one, working out a method to provide adequate retirement



There are no "cookbook" recipes for passing on the farm, according to Marion L. Bowlan, executive director of Pennsylvania Farm Link, second from left. Speakers at the farm estate transfer workshop included, from left, Kevin Baer, coordinator to the Chester County Agriculture Land Preservation Program; Bowlan; Samuel Goodley, of Byler, Goodman, and Goodley; and Suzanne Lamborn, landowner.

income; two, treating all children equitably in the decision; and third, managing the succession so the next generation won't be saddled with unreasonable debts.

"These are all very difficult issues," said Bowlan. "There are no easy answers. A lot of discus-

sion will determine the success of the farm transfer."

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