

Developing a Farm Newsletter for Landlords

The most recent Iowa State University Farmland Ownership Survey indicated that 55 percent of acres in Iowa are under a rental arrangement. Twenty-one percent of Iowa land was owned by someone who lived out-of-state at least part of the year. Whether a landowner purchased and farmed the land themselves, inherited it, or purchased it as an investment, communication is important. If rental settlement is the only time of communication between a landowner and tenant, it may be difficult to make changes when necessary.

The Farm Newsletter

One way to improve communications between tenants and landowners is for tenants to develop a farm newsletter. Producing a farm newsletter does not have to be a difficult or time-consuming task. In some cases, it's possible that the tenant has never met the landowner. A quarterly or semi-annual synopsis of what the tenant plans to do, and or has done, can be simple to write and update. In times of significant change, it could be crucial to maintaining the relationship.

A farm newsletter could be compared to a "Christmas newsletter." Many people use this format to help friends and family catch up with each other. Much like a "Christmas newsletter", a farm newsletter lets the landowner know what is going on. This is particularly true when the landowner lives too far from their farm to visit frequently.

A farm newsletter can take several forms. It can be colorful and technical with multiple pages, or it can remain simple and be a single page. The goal of a farm newsletter is to establish a regular communication link between the tenant and the landowner. If a landowner understands how their land is being farmed, they may develop a greater investment in who is farming their land.

The level of production or management information in the newsletter depends on the rental arrangement between the tenant and landowner(s). A cash rental

arrangement may require little technical information. A crop-share rental arrangement requires more information, because the tenant's management decisions have an impact on landowner profitability. A flexible cash lease arrangement could benefit from sharing updates on the variables in the formula used to set the lease rate.

Tenants often rent from multiple landowners. Those landowners may have multiple interests. A common component of the newsletter could provide general information about the crop situation. Tenants may want to discuss topics such as the importance of biotechnology in their farming operation and how it may have a positive environmental impact. They may want to share how they are using precision agriculture. If information has been compiled for the landowners' farms, yield or fertility maps, those could be shared as well. The tenant could also provide updates on the costs of crop production. Discussing issues will allow landowners to better understand the economic and environmental impacts of current technologies.

There are crucial elements of a farm newsletter that should be included. The newsletter should have a readable font, clear and concise wording, and be a reasonable length for the reader. It may be helpful to limit the length to the front and back of a single sheet of paper. Using a friendly tone should help to keep the reader interested. Relevant photos of crop progress or land improvements may encourage continued connection. If a weather event has caused the need to repair structures, before and after photos show the results and allow the landowner to stay informed.

Key Elements of the Farm Newsletter A farm newsletter should include the following.

Title – A simple title will do. If the title is reflective of your operation, name that could help set the tone.

Tenant contact information – Include your name, US Mail address, email address, cell phone, and

J. Bob Wells, Iowa State University

Page 2 File C2-14

any other information that identifies the person to contact with any questions. Indicating your preferred contact method is encouraged.

Content - The content is where you'll build familiarity. You may want to sketch out what you intend to share over time and when you plan to share that information. The newsletter could be used to share struggles, successes, and failures as you manage the landowner's land.

Happenings since the last farm newsletter - This section should be a short synopsis of what has happened since you sent the last farm newsletter. General statements should be used in this section. For example, "We wrapped up harvest the second week of November. The much-needed rain in midJuly must have helped because there was about average production." You may want to customize this section for each landowner with reports about improvements the owner prioritizes like fences, buildings, waterways, and wildlife habitats.

Crop progress/pasture condition/livestock development - If the rental arrangement is a cropshare or flexible cash lease agreement, the landowner may be interested in knowing about crop progress. If the rental arrangement is a cash rental arrangement, an update on crop progress will help the landowner feel more connected to the farming operation. You will need to decide whether one newsletter serves landowners with different lease types or if there a common base and an additional page for landowners with each type of lease.

Weather update – Weather has a great impact on productivity. If the landowner lives on the farm, they can observe current effects on the land. The further a landowner is separated from their land, the less likely they are to be aware of seasonal impacts of weather. Sharing the recent and anticipated weather can help landowners understand its impact. Landowners should be made aware of the effects of severe weather, e.g. high winds and hail.

Commodity prices – The tenant could also provide a brief synopsis of relevant commodity prices and price trends, and discuss what futures markets are suggesting. Relate current prices to historical prices and remind the landowner of the historical variability in prices.

Technology - This section can help landowners better understand technology changes in the farming operation. A growing percentage of landowners do not have experience in production agriculture. Even landowners with prior experience in production agriculture may not have knowledge of current agricultural technology. Technological adoption varies between farm operations. Competition for land is significant, and communicating your approach could be beneficial.

Summary – Include a paragraph or two summarizing the current situation. Use this as an opportunity to thank the landowner for the relationship and share how the different components come together.

Upcoming events - Share what is being planned for the upcoming months. A winter newsletter may discuss planting intentions and the crop acreage mix being considered. A summer newsletter might include Extension and Outreach events such as leasing meetings in July and August or near-by field days.

Questions to Answer

Consider the purpose of a farm newsletter. How can it best establish a regular communication link between tenant and landowner? How often should tenants plan to send landowners a newsletter? Answering these questions and setting a regular schedule for distribution will make writing the newsletter a smooth task and encourage open communication between tenant and landowner.

... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Cathann A. Kress, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.