The 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture indicated that over 40% of all U.S. agricultural land is rented. Furthermore, farm management associations in various states have found that tenants typically rent from 3 to as many as 20 landowners. Sometimes these landowners are neighbors, persons who have moved to town following retirement from farming, inherited the land through an estate, or purchased the land as a speculative investment. Thus, it is not uncommon for a tenant seldom to have contact with the landowner outside of the customary rental settlement.

Agriculture is an evolving industry that has had to deal with technological adoption and the realization of the term “economies of size” during the past 10 years. A combination of increased competition for land to benefit from economies of size and more landowners not understanding production agriculture technology adoption has caused communications between tenants and landowners to become crucial.

The Farm Newsletter

One method Extension farm management specialists can recommend to improve communications between tenants and landowners is for tenants to develop a farm newsletter. Producing a farm newsletter is not as difficult as it once was, thanks to farmers’ adoption of computer technology. A 1999 USDA survey found that 40% of U.S. farmers owned or leased a computer, 24% of U.S. farmers used a computer for record keeping, and 29% of U.S. farmers had access to the Internet. Extension farm management specialists can compare the farm newsletter to the “Christmas Newsletters” the tenant probably receives that allow friends and family to catch up with each other. The specialist can explain that, much like a Christmas Newsletter, a farm newsletter acts as a way to let the landowner know what is going on. This is particularly true when the landowner lives in San Francisco and the tenant is farming his/her land in the Midwest. It may be that the tenant has never met the landowner. Thus, a quarterly or semi-annual synopsis of what the tenant plans to do can be beneficial, and at times crucial, for the long-term relationship between tenant and landowner.

A farm newsletter can take several forms. It can be very colorful and technical, or it can be a single typed page. But the goal is the same: to establish a regular communication link between the tenant and the landowner. This goal can be accomplished by making the landowner feel like part of the farming operation. The level of either production or management information contained in the newsletter depends on the most common rental arrangement between the tenant and landowners. A cash rental agreement may require little technical information. A crop-share rental agreement requires more information, because the tenant’s management decisions have an impact on landowner profitability. Because tenants may rent from multiple landowners and the landowners may have multiple interests, providing general summary information is a safe method. The tenants can discuss topics such as the importance of biotechnology in farming (e.g., how it may have a positive environmental impact), how precision agriculture works, and the information they have compiled for the landowners’ farms (e.g., yield maps). Note: the tenant should make sure to help the landowner understand the costs of precision agriculture, so that the landowner realizes that yield maps can’t just be give away.

Discussing issues such as these will allow landowners to better understand the economic and environmental impacts of using new technologies. More and more landowners lack an agriculture background, so it behooves tenants to help educate them about production agriculture.
There are a few crucial elements of a farm newsletter. Key elements are discussed in more detail below. Other considerations include a readable font, clear and concise wording, a reasonable length, (preferably front and back of one page), and a friendly tone to keep the reader/landowner interested.

**Key Elements of the Farm Newsletter**

At the minimum, a farm newsletter should include the following.

**Title** - The title should be catchy, yet not wordy. The title of the newsletter should be used for several years, so the landowner does not develop the impression that the tenant is indecisive.

**Tenant Contact Information** - As with any communication between tenant and landowner, information pertaining to how to contact the tenant is important. Including contact information in the newsletter allows the landowner to feel as though the tenant is always willing to visit with the landowner.

**Informational Content** - The informational content provides the “what is going on” information about the farm. This is the section of the newsletter where the tenant helps the landowner become more familiar with the tenant’s farming operation.

**Overview of happenings since the last newsletter** - This section should be a short synopsis of what has happened since you sent the last newsletter. General statements should be used in this section. For example, “We wrapped up harvest on the second week of November. The much-needed rain in mid July must have helped out because there was about average production.” The tenant may also want to report in this section about land improvements/habitat enhancements undertaken since the last newsletter.

**Crop progress/pasture condition/livestock development** - Particularly if the rental arrangement is a commodity-share (or flexible cash) agreement, the landowner be interested in knowing about crop progress or livestock development. And, even if the rental arrangement is a cash rental arrangement, the landowner will feel more a part of the farming operation. What landowner doesn’t like to discuss, or even brag, about the land he or she owns? Land ownership to some is a social activity and a conversation piece. Thus, the tenant should give the landowner “something to talk about.”

**Weather update** - Farmers and non-farmers always have one area of interest in common, weather. Everyone understands the impact of not enough, average, and above average rainfall. Also, if the landowner is not aware of the effects of severe weather, e.g., high winds and hail, then he or she needs to be made aware of the impact of severe weather.

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

**Technology** - The tenant could use this section as an educational section to help landowners better understand technology change in the farming operation.

**Upcoming events** - In this section the tenant could let the landowner know what is being planned for the upcoming months. For instance, a winter newsletter may discuss planting intentions and the crop acreage mix being considered. Also, if there are important forthcoming community events, they should be mentioned.

**Conclusion**

This article provides some examples of what Extension farm management specialists can suggest as contents for a farm newsletter. Again, the goal of the newsletter is to build, or continue, a working relationship between the tenant and landowner. Thus, suggesting that a tenant produce a farm newsletter may be among the best advice an Extension specialist can give. For an example farm newsletter, readers can contact the lead author.