

A New Wave of Farmers



Jeff Bramlett, Pitchfork and Crow Farm, Lebanon, Oregon

On a typical, gray, Oregon Spring day, Carrie Heisler and Jeff Bramlett from Pitchfork and Crow Farm were seeding flats of lettuce, while they described what brought them to farming. Jeff had long been a special education teacher and Carrie a natural resources researcher when the couple decided they needed a career change, craving more time outdoors and hands-on work. Beginning farmers are coming from a variety of backgrounds, and many don't have a family history in farming. Before the couple started farming, they had been committed to their intense home garden, spent many a Summer night canning away, and thought carefully about their food choices. Starting to farm was a way for them to take their love for high quality food to a new level.

For various political, environmental, economical, or health inspired reasons, people are following a popular trend of critically considering their food choices. With "organic" a common distinction in food aisles and "local" taking hold as well, the Obama's vegetable garden, rising fuel prices, and food safety concerns, there is a multi-faceted confrontation on our nation's production and delivery of food. "We're living in a fascinating time," says Garry Stephenson, Coordinator of Oregon State University's Small Farms Program (SFP). "I've worked with OSU Extension for 25 years and for a very long time farmers said people didn't care where their food came from, but since the early 2000's interest has really taken off. People like farmers. They think of them as rock stars."



Jeff Bramlett and Carrie Heisler,
Pitchfork and Crow Farm,
Lebanon, Oregon



Elias Silvernail and Rachel Ashley
Rainshine Farm, Corvallis, Oregon

Beginner farmers are highly motivated and value-oriented, responding to a need for change in the nation's agricultural system. Rachel Ashley and Elias Silvernail began farming organic vegetables on 2 acres in Corvallis, OR, in 2005. A farm is considered a "beginning farm," if it has been established for less than 10 years (ERS, 2009). Rachel and Elias choose to focus their sales within their community, knowing that they are adding resiliency and strength amongst their network. The couple had been politically active for years and then turned to farming because as Rachel puts it, "growing food seems like part of the solution. Instead of marching in Washington, we're growing food for our neighbors."

Chris Seigel from Wealth Underground Farm in Portland says one of the reasons he farms is to, "change people's diet and sense of responsibility between what they eat and how it affects the environment." To help reach that goal, the farm has linked with Portland State University to provide a class called "The Homesteader," and also offers free workshops under the title, "Farm School."



Chris Seigel (red) and Nolan Calisch (front, center), during a Homesteader Class session,
Wealth Underground Farm, Portland, Oregon

In New York,
Cross Island Farms

owner, David Belding, described his ardent commitment to environmental consciousness and social values. He abides by the concept that, "we don't own the land, but borrow it from our grandchildren." David said he does not utilize many practices that are actually allowed under the USDA's standard of organic, in effort to be even more environmentally respectful than is required of "organic" farmers. Other farmers also following suit describe their farming techniques as, "beyond organic."



David Belding, Cross Island Farms,
Wellesley Island, New York

These passionate farmers are gaining presence. Since 2002, nearly 300,000 new farms have begun in operation, increasing the number of farms by 4%, which had steadily declined since World War II (USDA NASS, 2007). They tend to have more diversified production, fewer acres and lower sales, compared to established farmers. Also, this new corps is more diverse in ethnicity and age. The 2007 Census counted nearly 30% more women as principal farm operators and 10% more Hispanic operators, compared to 2002.

American Indian, Asian, and Black farm operators are also increasing (USDA News Release, 2009). In 2007, 17% of beginner

farmers were under the age of 35 years. Thirty-two percent of beginner farmers were 55 years or older, compared to 63% of established farmers being above 55 years (ERS, 2009). Though beginner farmers come from a variety of backgrounds, most of the farmers that Erica Frenay sees through the Cornell Small Farm Program's Beginner Farmer Project training are "sustainably-minded" with their practices, often following "organic" guidelines. Similarly, Garry Stephenson described the OSU SFP's Beginner Farmer course to have a "sustainable" focus to it.

While it is encouraging to see the establishment of more farms, beginner farmers face serious obstacles. The biggest challenges are lack of capital, lack of land access, lack of health care, and lack of credit access. Lack of financial resources is a particular problem for young farmers, who may have college loans and/or the expenses that come with starting a family. In addition, many young farmers spend years learning to farm as a low-paid field hand. Adding to these challenges is the fact that farmers are asked to draw on an extremely wide array of skills in business, soil fertility, landscape design, pests and diseases, leadership, efficiency, and organization. On top of those tasks, farmers face physical demands and unpredictable weather events.

David Belding from Cross Island Farms described the financial aspect of farming in saying, "All I know is that we're growing and working full time and partner has pension – its not realistic to expect that farmers will be in the same position as us. No one goes into farming to get rich but if you can't support your basic needs, send your kids to college; it's not going to work. We should have a system so that you can make a living and retire and a reasonable age." Most beginning farmers cannot rely exclusively on the farm. For example, Pitchfork and Crow is working towards the point where Carrie can work full time on the farm and resign from her research position. Almost 80% of beginner farmers work off the farm (USDA NASS, 2007).

There are limited non-governmental programs available to provide funding for beginning farmers. A notable program, The Carrot Project, based in Western Massachusetts, partners

with farmers, lenders, investors, donors, and farm service providers to create loan programs and strengthen the base of resources for small and midsized farms and farm-related businesses.

As for governmental programs, the 2008 Farm Bill instated the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. The program provides grants to universities and non-profits for beginning farmer training (USDA ERS, 2008). The program has been, “one of the most successful,” in helping young and beginning farmers (NYFC, 2011). By 2011, it was estimated that these grants supported training for more than 10,000 beginning farmers.

Also in the 2008 Farm Bill, Individual Development Accounts (IDA) for beginner farmers were approved. Farmers are to deposit into an IDA and that sum would be matched or at most doubled with federal funds. While IDA's were approved, money has not actually been appropriated and the total sum provided would be paltry in comparison to the total costs of farming enterprises.

The USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides 50% of its direct operating loans and 70% of its farm ownership loans to beginning farmers and ranchers. In spite of good intentions, the loan programs are not being utilized to their full potential (NYFC, 2011). The inability to get small loans from the program proves problematic. The FSA gives loans up to \$300K and the required amount of paperwork and eligibility requirements are the same, regardless of loan size.

For that reason, for a loan less than 50K, the paperwork isn't worth the farmer's time, and the agency is not interested in processing small loans (NYFC, 2011). In addition, because of lack of knowledge between FSA offices, some agents do not know of the loan program and turn beginner farmers and ranchers away. Lastly, the direct ownership loans require that farmers have at least 3 but less than 10 years of managerial experience. This criterion does not fit many beginner farmers. However, some agents are lenient on this standard and find other criteria a farmer can fulfill (NYFC, 2011).

A really prime resource for farmers has been other farmers who can provide insight on the specifics of the area, including growing conditions and local markets. Farm apprenticeships and University Extension Services are also good resources for farmers. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, a project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology, holds the most comprehensive database of farm apprenticeships and internships in the country and a wealth of resources on organic methods and marketing. Though this service, called “ATTRA” is well utilized and serves every state, it lost all federal funding in the 2011 budget cycle (NYFC, 2011).

By 2030 it is estimated that one quarter (500,000) of the nation's farmers will retire and with that, the land they manage will change hands. That amounts to 400 million acres or 70% of the nation's private farm and ranchlands will change hands by 2030 (NYFC, 2011). Such turnover may create opportunity for farmers needing land. However, without policy to protect prime farmland from development and keep farmland at an affordable price for the next generation of farmers, that opportunity may not come to fruition (NYFC, 2011). The

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program works to keep agricultural land in use by means of conservation easements.

Recently, the FSA started the Land Contract Guarantee Program, which works to encourage transfer of farm real estate to beginning or socially disadvantaged farmers. The program works by providing guarantees to farm owners, reducing the risk to the seller due to buyer default on the land contract. The land contract is an installment contract between the buyer and seller. The buyer must provide a minimum down payment of 5% of the purchase price, plan to operate the farm, and be able to project the ability to make the land contract payments.



Rachel Ashley, Rainshine Farm, Corvallis, Oregon

Many see beginner farmers as an asset for making badly needed changes to the food system, resulting in better environmental treatment, stronger communities, and safer food. Beginner farmers bring hope. To make positive changes to the food system, many farmers believe effort really needs to come from consumers making conscious food choices. As Rachel from Rainshine Farm said, “It takes a whole group of people saying yes we value this, we’re going to protect our food because this is important. I think change is going to be grass up.”

For more information on beginner farmers, the obstacles they face, their stories, and policy recommendations check out the report, “Building a Future with Farmers,” done by the National Young Farmers Coalition, http://www.youngfarmers.org/reports/Building_A_Future_With_Farmers.pdf.

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