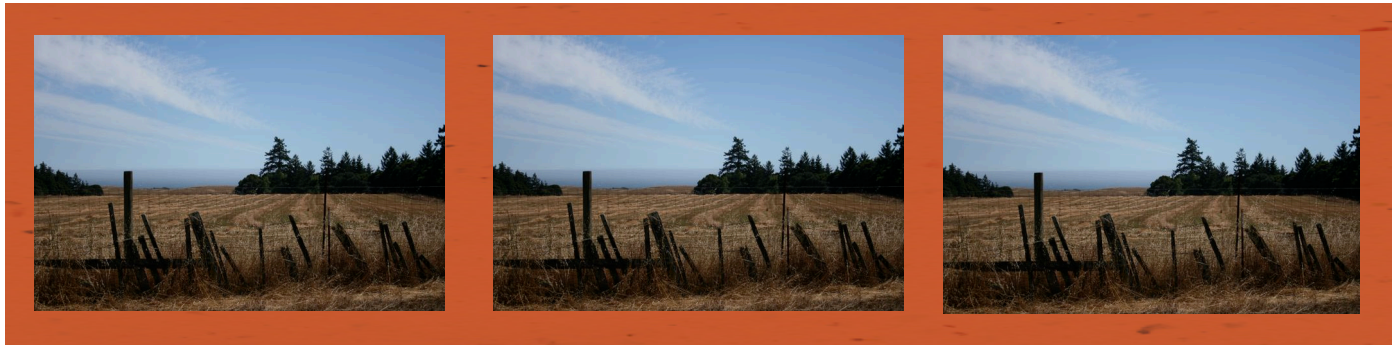


A NEW GENERATION OF WORKING LANDS:

Possibilities for Land Trusts and Beginner Farmers in Coastal California

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INTRODUCTION

The report herein is a summary of key findings from a study done with land trusts and the beginner farmer population in coastal California. Findings suggest that there is great potential for these two groups to work together towards mutually beneficial ends. However, a relationship between these two populations will only work if both groups come to the table understanding the needs of the other. This report hopes to introduce the most important factors for collaboration.

Research for this study was conducted between February 2010 and April 2011. In total, 34 participants were interviewed. The study was situated in all counties that border the coast of California- from Del Norte to San Diego (see Figure 1). The participants represented a wide geographic spread from north to south. All land trusts currently operating in the aforementioned counties were contacted. In total, 17 land trusts, 10 stake holders, and 7 beginner farmers took part. One of the 17 land trusts was from out of state. Data was collected using qualitative research methods and coded using grounded theory.

What follows here are the findings from that study, in two sections, one aimed at clarifying issues and giving model examples for for land trusts, the other the same for beginner farmers.



Figure 1. Study site, coastal California

For Land Trusts

There is no doubt that land trusts in coastal California have done an amazing job of protecting agricultural areas, open space, and habitat from development. Decades of successful conservation work has placed just under two hundred thousand acres of land under land trust protection both in fee and easement in coastal counties. From this study's findings, at least half of that land was in agricultural production at one point. Many conservation land trusts on the coast are increasingly finding themselves with agricultural land in fee and easement under their purview. Land trusts in this study expressed interest in best practices for agricultural land with particular interest in how to tap into excitement around local foods, farmers markets, and beginner farmers.

Culture Shift

Just over 30% (5) of the land trusts recognized that there is a culture shift happening in the US and saw the need to adapt to the trend of an increasingly urbanized population, who are disconnected from a more traditional concept of nature conservation. The popular movement around local food was one prevalent idea that land trusts thought may help connect them to a younger urban demographic.

Beginner Farmers

According to the USDA, many of the beginning farmer and rancher operations springing up across the country are geared towards direct marketing of their products in a urban setting. The challenge for land trusts looking to appeal to urban citizens who support those



Cows on coastal pasture, California, 2010.

markets is how to create sustainable long- term relationships with those farmers.

Lease Structures

Findings from this study suggest that many leases offered by land trusts on fee title land, are too short to incentivize beginner farmers to stay for the long haul. Land trusts that have had success in building long term relationships with beginner farmers have altered their lease agreements to include leases between 10-50 years generally with a 'roll-over' structure. Land trusts with longer lease structure reported significant environmental benefit as well as increased farmer and community support.

Lease to Buy

Though none of the California interviewees spoke to it, land trusts on a national scale are also working on ways for land trusts to *sell* land

back to beginner farmers. John Halsley, ED of the Peconic Land Trust in Long Island detailed efforts to support this new generation of farmers though 'overlay easements' that significantly lower land prices with a 'pre-emptive right' for the trust to insure it stays in farmers hands. They created an index model that takes that farmland out of market speculation and instead bases land value increase on improvements and the consumer price index. In addition, the Peconic Land Trust was given a downtown building and turned it into a local produce market where farmers on their land can sell their goods. They even went as far as to start an in-house farm apprenticeship and incubator program on their land. These measures have resulted in significant increases in donor and local community support.

Land Trusts Continued

Housing and Infrastructure

Land trusts should consider housing and infrastructure agreements when looking to lease or sell to any farmer, including beginner farmers. All of the farmers interviewed spoke to these two issues. For one farmer, it was not being able to live where she farmed, for another it was the neglected condition of the housing and out buildings. All agreed that having their housing rented at ‘market rate’ was unaffordable on their income and was the deciding factor in whether they would stay in the lease long term. One farmers’ statement epitomized this sentiment, speaking to their housing lease agreement.

“And it’s still to that point, where we can’t afford to live here, we just can’t afford to live here. I mean the last two years we got so so far in debt, just trying to pay to lease this [house], and stay here.”

Two beginner ranchers interviewed said that they were paying much more than the ranching industry standard of free land and housing

as trade for the land stewardship and management done by the ranching operation.

Several farmers also mentioned farm infrastructure as a primary concern. Farmers who lease do not see the benefit in putting work into existing infrastructure when they have no equity in the project (much less a short lease.) On the other hand, many land trusts spoke to a lack of funds for physical improvements. However several land trusts indicated they have received funding (see below) specifically for infrastructure projects on farms.

Land trusts should consider comparable land and housing lease agreements in the area, lest they alienate their farmers. In terms of housing, market rate may be over priced on the salary of a farmer. Though the land trusts benefits financially from this agreement, it may result in a quicker turn over in tenants. Lastly, considering what market rate for *affordable* housing is in the area, may be more appropriate for farmers.

Leadership

The results of this study clearly showed that the leadership of the land trust is the key to involving a progressive agricultural vision for the organization. Land trusts with leadership wedded to the identity of conservation were not willing to be creative in arrangements with farmers. In contrast, organizations whose board was actively seeking to create connections with beginner farmers and the local food movement went out of their way significantly to do so. As one land trusts put it succinctly;

“A lot of it comes down to the values of the land trust board so we’ve continued to recruit new board members with agricultural backgrounds”

In short, land trusts looking to work with this emerging population can do so. Crucial to their success will be finding new funding streams and being aware and attentive to issues most meaningful to the beginner farmer population; among those; land leases, housing, infrastructure, and equity.

FUNDING SOURCES CITED FOR WORKING WITH FARMERS

California Farmland Conservancy Department
California Bond Measures
California Department of Conservation
California Coastal Conservancy
NRCS
Packard Foundation
Propositions
Member Support
County Board of Supervisors
Sierra Land Conservancy
Williamson Act

For Beginner Farmers

With its excellent climate, year-round growing season, and accessible high end markets, coastal California is appealing to many beginner farmers. However, land competition in coastal California is intense, and in order to succeed, beginner farmers need stable access to affordable farmland.

Your Strengths

It is important to be able to communicate your strengths to a land trust. Know that beginner farmers are currently one face of the local food movement, an image that can be a great asset to a land trust. When meeting with a land trust come prepared with a detailed business plan that is tailored to the specific piece of land in which you are interested. Know what you can offer the land trust in terms of conservation: can you transition the land to organic? plant hedge rows? buffer strips? rotationally graze? encourage a return to native grasses? re-enliven the soil for better water filtration? Just as you are looking for a deal from a land trust, so too should you be considering what you can bring to the table. Also be aware of local land, housing and



A field of brassicas in a coastal valley, California, 2010.

infrastructure lease rates, and what you can realistically afford.

Relationships

Farmers stressed that the best way to gain access to land through land trusts is to build personal relationships with land trust board and staff. Having someone in the organization that supports your cause will encourage negotiation and communication.

RFP

Only one land trust interviewed described ever having put out an request for proposal for available land. Don't wait for land to be advertised, if you know of an area owned by a land trust that you'd like to farm, approach your local land trust directly and let them know you are interested.

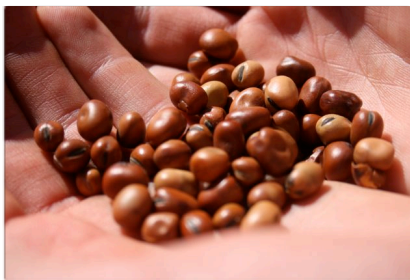
The Right Size

Don't bite off more than more than you can chew! Beginner

farmers frequently reported having committed to too much land in their initial leases with land trusts. See if the land trust is open to leases that can grow, starting with a small amount of land and gradually expanding your business.

Tailor Made

Knowing what you want is the most important step in any land deal. Are you interested in short term leases? Long term leases? Lease to buy arrangements? Each scenario will yield a different result. Call other farmers that deal with this land trust and ask about their arrangements. There is a wide range of ways to access land through land trusts and it is important to create an agreement that has flexibility enough to change as your business changes. Consider what your needs are now, and what they may grow to be in the future and put together a proposal that meets those needs.



[Your success] really does depend on your relationships with people.

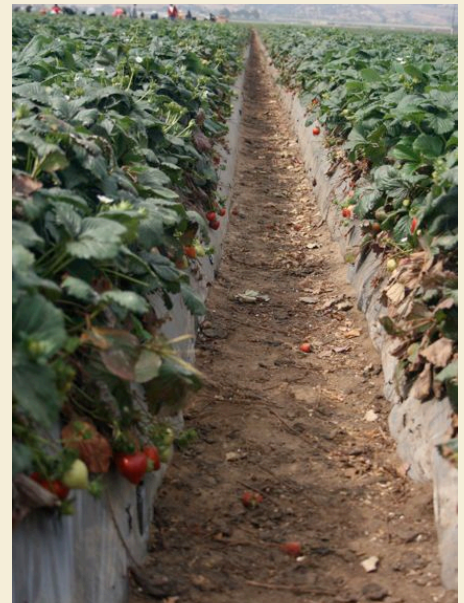
- Beginner Farmer

Conclusion

There are definite possibilities for land trusts and beginner farmers to work together. First, both parties need to consider how the other may be able to benefit their cause. Secondly, both land trusts and beginner farmers must understand fully their short and long term individual needs and interests. Paramount to these agreements is trust. Both parties need to be assured that the other is working with their interest at heart. Land trusts need to consider how this population of farmers can serve their conservation interests as well as enhancing their programming. The emerging local food movement is an incredible

opportunity for land trusts to relate their work to a new sector of the population. In order to do that effectively, they must create substantial mutualistic relationships with farmers that grow for that market. Relationships of this caliber will most likely take an investment of staff, programming, and most importantly, time. The land trusts who have already made this shift testified that the effort has been well worth it.

“So that's kind of what I would like to challenge that (land trust) on, you have a very large young farming movement, how are you going to support them? ... What are you going to do that will enable those farmers to actually be able to thrive in this area? And provide!” - Beginner Farmer



Strawberries, Central Coast, California 2010



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