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Writing to a Prospective Landlord: Resources to help our next generation of farmers

One of the challenges for beginning farmers is acquiring the land they need for a successful farming operation. Renting land is usually the most readily available way for a beginning farmer to acquire land. Renting does not require the acquisition of long term debt during the startup phase of the business.

Renting land is a common practice in Iowa. More than half the farmland in Iowa is rented. In some counties, over two-thirds of the land is rented. A beginning farmer faces strong competition when it comes to renting land.

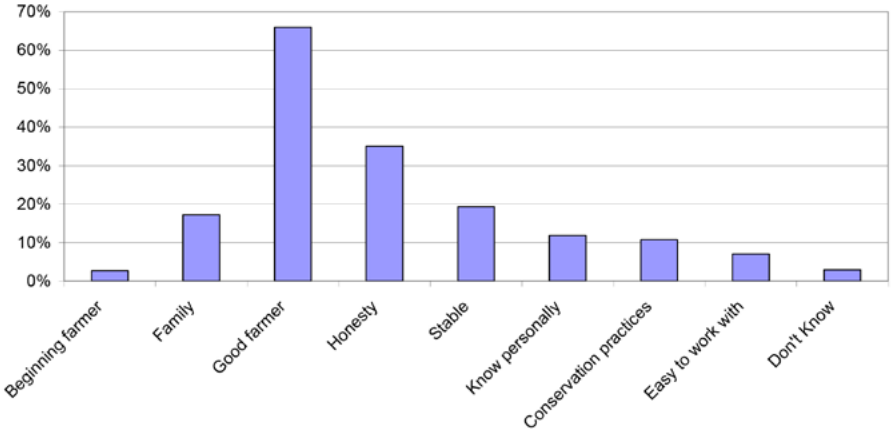
Given the competition for land, how can a beginning farmer approach a landlord? How can they convince the landlord to rent to a beginning farmer as opposed to a more established farmer? These are some commonly asked questions. There is not a single best way to approach a landlord. However, there are several effective techniques and things that should and should not be done.

Landlord Expectations

Research shows that most landlords indicate they are looking for a “good farmer.” A good farmer can be defined in many ways. In the 2007 survey of Iowa farmland ownership, respondents said a “good farmer” was someone who used good farming practices, did a good job, took care of the land, was a good steward of the land, controlled weeds, accomplished tasks in a timely fashion, used good equipment, and had a reputation of being a good farmer. A good farmer also uses conservation practices, is conservation oriented, and conserves the water and soil.

The graph below shows the other areas indicated by landlords as the most important factors they consider when choosing a tenant. Personal characteristics included honesty, integrity, reliability, and being trustworthy.

Percent of Rented Farmland based on Reason for Renting, 2007



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The landlords who indicated good relationships as an important factor said they wanted a tenant who they could easily work with, respected their wishes, had a good personality, and was a good communicator. The landlords described a financially stable tenant as someone they felt would pay the rent on time.

Building Good Relations

Being a family member or neighbor of the landlord cannot be changed, but it is possible to get to know them outside of a business relationship. It is never too soon for beginning farmers to start cultivating relationships that will serve them well throughout their farming career and life.

Notice in the graph on the previous page that the landlords were not predisposed to rent to beginning farmers only because they were beginning farmers. This means the beginning farmer must work to show the landlord that they have other favorable characteristics that set them apart as a tenant.

Writing a Letter

So what can you as beginning farmer do? One approach is to write a letter to your prospective landlord outlining why they should rent to you.

A letter should be written using proper grammar and spelling (do not just rely on spell check.) The correspondence should be in a professional, business format, not like a personal e-mail. Remember there is only one chance to make a first impression, and you want that to be a positive experience for both parties.

It is important to tell about your education, knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, and aptitude. Let the landlord know your farming philosophy and your approach to farming. Mention your short and long term farming goals and why you are interested in farming.

Be sure to point out that the landlord would be eligible for Iowa's Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Program. Include information, such as the brochure, on the program with the letter.

Inform the landlord about your family and community involvement. Offer to provide production records and references if needed.

Tell why you would like to rent from this particular owner or rent a particular farm. Personalize the letter so it does not sound like it is simply a form letter sent to everyone.

The letter should be short, concise, and to the point. Be positive in your approach. Remember that you are trying to sell yourself. You are trying to make the landlord choose you over all the other people who want to farm the land. Include in your letter what you think the landlord would want to know.

Ask Questions First

Before you begin writing a letter, you should first ask yourself, "Why do I want to rent from this landlord?" Sometimes when considering the location and future complexities, you rethink your decision to write a letter at all.

Other Communication Tools

A sample letter to a prospective landlord and more information can be found at the Beginning Farmer Center's website: www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc.

Having a good resume and a newsletter can also be effective communication devices for beginning farmers. "Designing a Farm Resume" file C2-C13 and "Developing a Farm Newsletter for Landlords" file C2-14 are two useful publications that can be found on the Iowa State University Extension Ag Decision Maker website at: www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm.