

Workshop

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age as it did in 1982. During the same 25-year period, those Nebraska farm and ranch operators 65 and older have increased to 149 percent.

Meyer pointed to the exodus of young people from rural areas, fueled by the “prohibitive” cost of land.

“Farmers are aging, and the cost of land has made it difficult for young farmers to start their own farms,” she said.

GETTING INTO THE BUSINESS

While those figures might discourage young farmers, Meyer looks at it another way. “It’s the right time to get in and engage in farming,” she said.

The CFRA offers its Land Link program as a way of bringing together beginning farmers, retiring farmers and landowners looking to sell their property.

The demand for land greatly outweighs the supply, Meyer said. Land Link has attracted about 300 beginning farmers but only 30 current landowners.

Under such a situation, beginning farmers must actively market themselves, Meyer said.

“Tell everyone you know that you want to start farming. Talk to farmers you know and build relationships with them,” she said. “Make it known in your community that you want to farm, and attend meetings where other farmers gather and network.”

Land Link connects farmers in a way that benefits both parties, Meyer said.

“The two biggest challenges are access to land and access to capital,” she said. “With Land Link, the beginning farmer benefits by gaining access to help with financing and experience. The retiring farmer benefits because this provides for continuity of the land and fresh energy and hands.”

Land Link provides a transition for all parties, Meyer said.

“The beginning farmer has experience and great passion but doesn’t have the resources,” she said. “The retiring farmer is looking at maintaining a legacy. The landowner wants to keep his property in the community.”

Interested parties contact CFRA to fill out an application. Both parties define their goals and the resources they want to contribute to the partnership. Beginners contact the landowners and begin the linking process.

Beginners access land, equipment and expertise through partnerships with landowners and existing farmers they might not otherwise find. Learning from a senior landowner can also help a beginner avoid costly mistakes.

Landowners and beginners partner in a variety of mutually beneficial ways: 50-50 partnerships, land and equipment rental, and livestock herd transfer agreements.

The process can identify strategies, educational programs, financing options, tax incentives and conservation programs.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

However, the idea of handing over the reins can be overwhelming for many older farmers, according to Marian Beethe with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

“We are facing our own mortality. We don’t like to plan, or it’s too complicated,” she said. “Then, there’s the question of dealing with family members. We don’t know how to make things equal. It’s easier to wait and see what happens.”

Some producers just want to avoid the situation altogether, Beethe said. “You think, ‘I just want to go back to the 40 acres and farm,’” she said.

Still other farmers are afraid of giving up part of their land and income in their golden years, she said.

“What do we live on? We can’t retire yet, we’re still in debt!” she said. “How will our operations pay the expenses for a second or even third family? We don’t want kids to struggle like we did.”

When it comes to passing on the farm, practice good communication in expressing your

plans, Beethe said.

But that doesn’t always ensure family harmony, she added. “What’s equal isn’t always fair, and what’s fair isn’t always equal,” she said.

The keys to success? Fit the agreement to the situation, develop a written agreement and update the business arrangement, she said.

Beethe explained the Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Act for Nebraska. She also spoke about the state’s farm mediation service, financial counseling, the Rural Response Hotline, Nebraska Drought Control and risk management.

Other speakers Thursday included Michael Steffen and Angie Teboe with the Farm Service

Agency in Hartington, speaking on FSA loan programs, and Traci Bruckner of the CFRA speaking on the federal farm bill programs.

The workshop included a discussion on Nebraska’s value-added producers’ grant, which assists producers who refine produce and sell it.

Tim Nissen said the grant has benefited his family-owned Nissen Wine company in northern Cedar County. The winery turns its grapes into wine.

“It’s a good program for any specialty crop producers who add value to the crops they grow,” he said. “A program like this gets you into agriculture, but a different side and not the traditional commodities.”

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

For Wortmann, Gubbels and Dendinger, the workshop offered a number of ideas along with important moral support.

Wortmann wants to expand his operation near Wynot, Neb., which includes niche crops. He and his wife raise about 800 laying hens, producing free-range eggs. They are selling the eggs in to Omaha and Sioux Falls businesses, and they will soon add Yankton and Vermillion outlets.

Eventually, they would like to operate the farm full-time rather than both hold jobs in town for additional income.

“I thought niche farming would provide the opportunity

to expand into medium-sized farming,” he said. “I would like more cattle, but I still want to do niche farming and build myself up.”

Dendinger farms near Coleridge, Neb., on his own operation and also works with his father, Dave. Jake came to Thursday’s meeting, hoping to learn more about the Nebraska tax credit. Dave came to learn more about estate planning.

Gubbels farms near Randolph, Neb., as part of a family operation raising both crops and livestock.

The 20-year-old Gubbels first attended Northeast Community College in Norfolk, Neb. He doesn’t regret the decision at all.

“I studied diversified ag. It was a combination of animal health and plant science,” he said. “It was one of the best investments that I have ever made.”

Gubbels has taken advantage of the beginning farmer tax credit, which helped him gain one pasture. He is looking at the possibility of acquiring farm ground in 2013, part of his long-range plan for expanding his operation.

“I have a passion for it,” he said. “I grew up on a farm, and I always wanted to do it.”

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