Farm transition program links farmers with younger counterparts

As average age of Kansas farmer increases, K-State’s Land Link program helps to keep family farms running

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – In Kansas, the average age of an agricultural producer is 58.1 years old, according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The same report indicates 66% of those who farm in the Sunflower State are more than 55 years old.

What that means, says Ashlee Westerhold, is that “most of our farmers or ranchers could retire sometime in the next 10 years.”

As director of the Office of Farm and Ranch Transition at Kansas State University, Westerhold is keenly aware of the emerging issues in Kansas farm ownership.

“A 2012 study from the Harvard Business School found that 70% of family-owned businesses fail to transition (to new owners) successfully,” she said. “In Kansas, 84.6% of Kansas farmers are family owned.”

The Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition recently led a series of 10 focus groups in the state that could help create a link between older farmers and ranchers wanting to leave the business, and younger producers needing help getting started.

“A common issue discussed within the focus groups was the lack of land access,” Westerhold said. “Unless (aspiring farmers) have an inheritance or benefactor, being able to create an agricultural operation is extremely difficult.”

Westerhold said the office she leads – also often called AgKansitions – pairs older farmers with younger counterparts in a program called the Kansas Land Link.

“Land Link provides the opportunity for a landowner who does not have anyone coming back to the farm to be matched with a beginning farmer or rancher who is interested in the opportunity,” Westerhold said.
The online application costs $100. Producers list key components of the current operation, who is involved, goals they have for the future and characteristics of a young farmer they may be looking at to complete transition of the farm. All information is confidential.

The young farmer or rancher must list their goals for getting into the business, areas of the state to which they are willing to locate and the type of farm or ranch they are interested in.

“My office collects all the information from applicants (and) determines if we think there is a suitable candidate for a match,” Westerhold said. “We may call the landowner and give them the application of the land seeker to determine if they are, indeed, a potential match.”

Westerhold said there are also opportunities for the landowner to mentor the younger farmer in such areas as record keeping, grain marketing decisions, inputs, how they have remained profitable, and more.

“Some landowners have even been willing to work with beginning farmers and ranchers in procuring capital, such as FSA loans or conventional loans,” Westerhold said. “The landowners see these land seekers as an apprentice, and in a testing period to see if this (transition) could be a fit.”

More information about AgKansitions and the Land Link program is available at https://www.agkansitions.org.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

Kansas Grazing Land Coalition (focus group report), www.kglc.org/publications.cfm

Office of Farm and Ranch Transition (Kansas State University), https://www.agkansitions.org

Land Link membership, https://www.agkansitions.org/land-link-membership

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