

Graduate Research Project in
Food Systems & Agroecology
by Susanna Baxley

**PROJECT
SUMMARY
REPORT**

*for
Vermont Land
Trust & Farm
Seekers*

THE WORKING LANDSCAPE

Vermont Land Trust & Farmland Access in Vermont





ABSTRACT

The number one challenge facing young farmers is access to land (Ackoff et al., 2017). Other challenges include rising student debt, high real estate values, health insurance costs, and discriminatory lending practices. As well, there are rising concerns that farm viability and the agricultural landscape of the US is in peril as the sector sees an "aging" farmer population, loss of farmland to development, and a decrease in the number of mid-sized "family" farms alongside a proliferation of very large industrial farms that dominate markets. Farms do more than just provide food to their communities; they are a cornerstone of rural economies and play an important role in providing ecosystem services and combatting climate change. Land trust organizations use land conservation tools to make farmland more affordable for farmers, which, in turn, helps to maintain our working landscapes. In light of expectations that up to 300 farms will be changing hands in the next 10 years in Vermont, this project (a collaboration with Vermont Land Trust [VLT]), used Participatory Action Research to engage farm seekers in a survey and focus group sessions to explore the characteristics, needs, knowledge, and barriers of farmers looking to access land through VLT. From the analysis of the qualitative data, the findings offer a set of recommendations at the organizational, community, and systemic level around how VLT can work to make farmland transitions that positively impact the sustainability, equity, regeneration, and viability of Vermont farmland.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

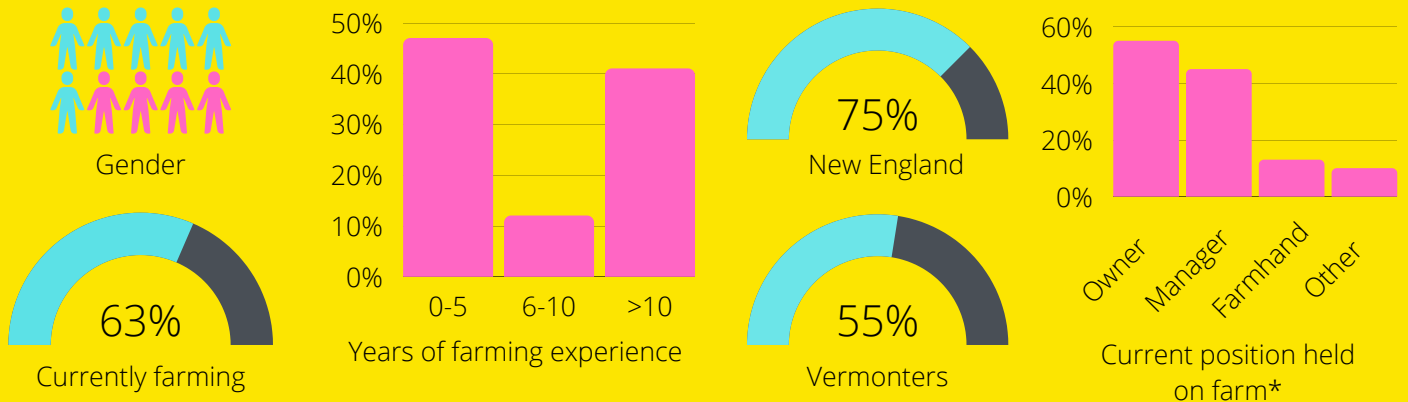
1. What are the characteristics, expectations, goals, and level of knowledge of individuals seeking land through Vermont Land Trust, and what are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the land trust model for land access?
2. What resources do land seekers need to better prepare for land access through a land trust, and how can Vermont Land Trust adapt existing tools to better connect famers looking to access land with available land in Vermont?
3. In what ways can Vermont Land Trust best leverage resources to have a positive impact on the sustainability and viability of Vermont's agricultural sector?

METHODS

The data from the survey and focus groups was analyzed using quantitative (SPSS) and qualitative (NVIVO) data analysis software. Themes were extracted from the data and a set of recommendations was developed based on the findings, knowledge of land access issues, and feedback from Vermont Land Trust. Below is a selection of the data, which is followed by a list of recommendations.

FARM SEEKER DEMOGRAPHICS

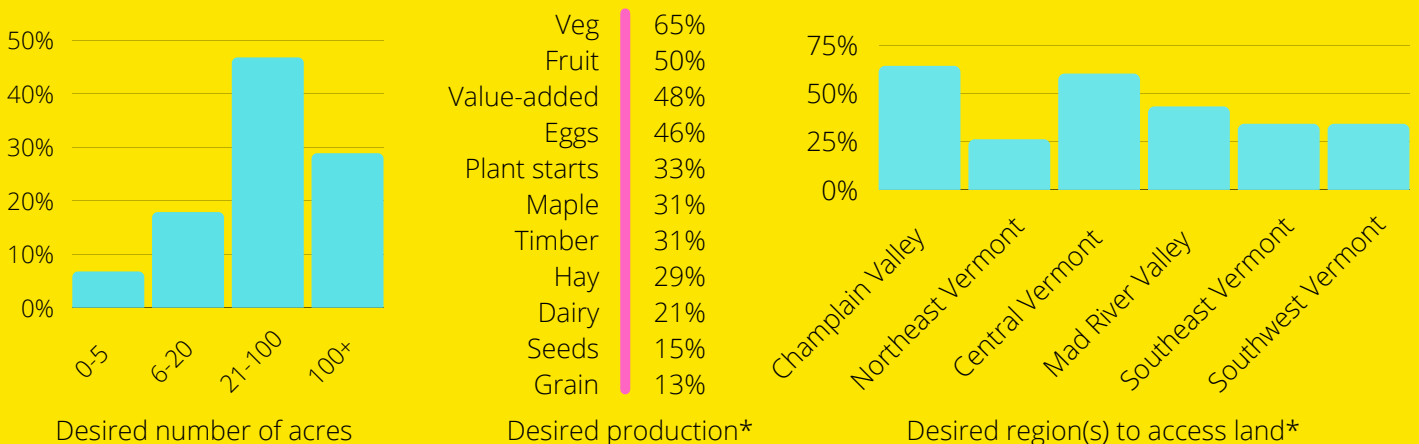
The majority of farm seekers that participated in this project were male (58%) New Englanders (75%) between the ages of 30-50 (66%) who have been farming for less than 10 years (59%). Most were currently farming (63%); if not, it was most commonly due to lack of land access. 55% own the farm they currently work on; 45% own the land on which their farm operates. Farm seekers were confident in their ability to access capital and willing to change their business plans to suit the landscape of potential farmland.



FARM SEEKER GOALS

Farm seekers were interested in accessing land within two years (86%) in all regions of Vermont, with the Champlain Valley and Central Vermont being the most popular (>60%). Interest in region was most often related to familiarity and/or proximity to friends or family. 43% desired to have a farm business that grosses more than \$50,000. Farm seekers were interested in producing a diversity of products, with vegetables being the most common (65%), followed by fruit (50%), meat (48%), and value-added products (48%).

The vast majority were interested in accessing land in any way they could (83%), with 25% interested in land access only through a land trust and 19% interested in collective or cooperative land access. Interest in agritourism was prominent in the focus group sessions.

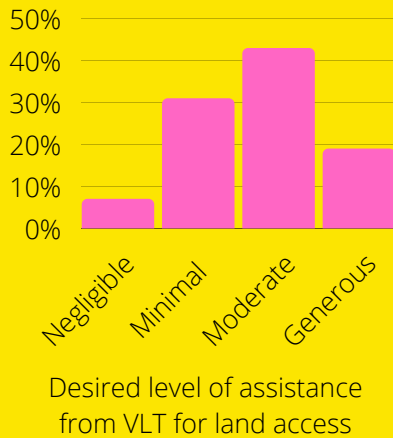


*percentages do not sum to zero as farm seekers were able to select multiple responses

RESOURCES NEEDED TO ACCESS LAND

Farm seekers signed up on VLT's email list hoping to be kept in the loop about available land (58%) or connect with VLT staff (23%); 20% were not actively seeking land.

Farm seekers were looking to receive minimal to moderate assistance from VLT staff in their land search (74%). The top three types of assistance selected were access to capital, education around different ways to access land, and assistance evaluating prospective land for desired land use.



LAND ACCESS VIA LAND TRUSTS

Farm seekers saw several advantages to accessing land through a land trust, with the top two being affordability and preventing development of land. Also suggested were the ability to access resources of a land trust organization and maintaining the working landscape of a region.

By far the most prominent disadvantage was the potential restriction on future development set by a conservation easement. Additional disadvantages included were the complexity and length of conservation process and a lack of affordable and available land.

Advantages

1. Affordability
2. Preventing development
3. Accessing land trust resources
4. Maintaining the working landscape

Disadvantages

1. Restriction(s) on development
2. Complexity and/or length of process
3. Lack of available and/or affordable lands

*percentages do not sum to zero as farm seekers were able to select multiple responses

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizational

- Provide educational materials (e.g., video series, workshops, case studies) on land access via land trusts
- Build toolkit for alternative farm access models
- Clarify expectations of farm-seeker list
- Trial farmer-centric (vs farm-centric) land access
- Revise farm-seeker sign-up form to gather more details
- Increase transparency around selection process for available lands
- Lobby for increased funding to expand Farmland Futures Fund and build others that improve farm seeker's access to capital

Community

- Focus efforts on succession planning and outreach to farmers looking to transition lands and businesses to the next generation
- Collaborate with organizations to develop hub for farm seeker resources, or develop comprehensive guide with dynamic links to various resources
- Build and foster community between farm seekers (e.g., online, meet-ups, workshops, mentorships)
- Collaborate with smaller land trusts to connect farmers looking to homestead and/or access smaller parcels

Systemic

- Prioritize BIPOC farm seekers & work toward reparations
- Collaborate with organizations to adapt or build new conservation tools
- Lobby for federal support for farmers around socio-economic needs that impact farm viability (e.g., medical insurance, student debt relief, childcare expenses)
- Build relationships with UVM institutions (Center for Rural Studies, Agricultural Research Station, UVM Extension, Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative) to access and share resources around data collection, food system transformation, and farm viability initiatives

FINAL THOUGHTS

Qualitative research does not represent any population other than the one under investigation - in this case, a group of farmers looking to access land through VLT. However, the findings offer valuable data for understanding more about who these farm seekers are and what they need, providing a basis upon which to base recommendations.

This summary report fails to encompass the entirety of the data, especially the words of the farm seekers that are so unique and powerful. The full (84-page) text can be found for free online at <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/> (search "Baxley"), which includes links to land access resources and a list of references for further study. Additionally, a video of the project details and findings can be found at <https://vimeo.com/600241938>.

Many thanks go to the farm seekers who participated in this study, my committee (Teresa Mares, Vic Izzo, Travis Reynolds, & Linda Berlin), Allison Spain, professors, fellow students, family, friends, and all the farmers who inspired me to pursue this degree.

Reference: Ackoff, S., Bahrenburg, A., & Shute, L.L. (2017). Building a future with farmers II: Results and recommendations from the national young farmer survey. National Young Farmers Coalition.

