

## AGRICULTURAL

# MU Guide

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## Developing a Farm Newsletter

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The 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture indicated that more than 40 percent of all U.S. agricultural land is rented. Furthermore, farm management associations in various states have found that tenants typically rent from three to as many as 20 landowners. In this potentially complex relationship, as in any other, good communication is a key to success. One way to improve communication and the chances for success of tenant/landowner arrangements is for the tenant to develop a farm newsletter.

Because of increased competition for land by tenants seeking to benefit from economies of scale, and because an increasing percentage of absentee landowners do not understand production agriculture, successful leasing arrangements are difficult to develop and maintain. It is not uncommon for a tenant to have little contact with landowners outside of the initial agreement and periodic rent settlement. A farm newsletter can take several forms, from a colorful and technical publication to a single, typed page. As a tenant, your goal for the newsletter is to establish a regular communication link with your landowners.

### Communication begins with knowing your audience

The type of information contained in the newsletter should be appropriate for the type of rental arrangement you have with the landowners and also the background, interests, and goals of the landowners. The landowner in a cash rental agreement may not be interested in technical information or may have inherited the family farm and have a personal attachment to it. The landowner in a crop-share arrangement is more likely to have an understanding of production agriculture and might like more information since the tenant's management decisions have an impact on the landowner's profit. If a tenant rents from multiple landowners with different interests, providing general summary information is a safe approach.

In addition to reports on current farming conditions and progress, newsletter topics can include items of general interest, such as the importance of biotechnology in farming or how precision agriculture, intensive grazing, and other new technologies work. A mutual understanding of the costs and benefits of adopting new technologies can be helpful in discussing changes in the farming operation or leasing arrangement. As more people without agricultural backgrounds become landowners, tenants may need to help them understand the basics of production agriculture.

Timing of the newsletter as a regular quarterly or semiannual update can be helpful to you the tenant as well as the landlord. You can plan newsletters to reflect significant progress or activities in the operation (planting, harvest, etc.), and the landowners learn they can depend on you to follow a schedule.

In addition to the newsletter, landowners might appreciate receiving management information you have compiled for the farm, such as yield maps, historical information on yields, fertilizer and pesticide applications, and crop rotations. Your interest and willingness to provide information can be a positive factor in future lease negotiations. Note that there may be concern over ownership of field maps. You should determine the landowner's willingness to provide this information on a case-by-case basis.

### Putting the newsletter together

Important aspects of a newsletter include readable print, clear and concise wording, and a friendly tone to keep the reader interested. A computer is not necessary for the production of a newsletter, but it provides many opportunities — developing a professional-looking design, ease of editing, maintenance of mailing lists, personalizing information for individual landowners, and possible electronic transmission. As a minimum, a farm newsletter should include the following elements, as illustrated in the sample newsletter on page 3:

## Title

The title should be catchy but not wordy. The same title should be used for several years so you don't appear indecisive. Because the title may be used for several years, be sure you like it before beginning the newsletter.

## Point of contact

As with any written communication, information on how to contact the author is important. Include contact information in the newsletter to assure the landowner that you (the tenant) are always willing to visit.

## Informational content

The body of the newsletter should describe "what is going on" on the farm. Sections of the newsletter, such as those listed below, can help the landowner become more familiar with the farming operation and the struggles and successes involved.

**Overview of happenings since last newsletter.** This section should be a short synopsis of what has been accomplished since the last newsletter — planting, harvest, land improvements, fence repairs, etc. Use general statements. For example, "We wrapped up harvest on the second week of November."

**Crop progress, pasture condition, livestock development.** If the rental arrangement is a commodity-share (or flexible cash) agreement, the landowner will have particular interest in knowing crop progress or livestock development. Even the landowner in a cash rental arrangement will feel more a part of the farming operation with this information. Let's face it, what landowner doesn't like to discuss, or even brag about, the land they own? And this newsletter can provide the information to do that.

**Weather update.** Farmers and nonfarmers have at least one area of interest in common — weather. Everyone understands the impact of too much or too little rainfall. If landowners are not aware of severe weather at the farm, such as high winds and hail, then they need to be made aware of its impact on the operation and property. Landowners who have lived on the farm may have personal interest in weather information because they remember events of the past — the big flood that broke the levee, the record snowstorm, the drought. Landowners who live in another part of the

country may not be familiar with the midwestern climate or have access to weather information for the local area.

**Commodity prices.** Provide the landowner a brief synopsis of relevant commodity prices and price trends. Discuss what futures markets are suggesting for prices. Relate current prices to historical prices, and remind the landowner of the historical variability in prices.

**Technology.** This can be an educational section to help the landowner better understand technological changes in farming. Be honest and provide your opinion when necessary. Discuss why you have (or have not) adopted Roundup Ready soybeans, Bt corn, intensive grazing, no-till planting. Point out advantages and disadvantages, expected costs and returns, and benefits to the environment or sustainability of the farm. An example of no-till adoption is in the sample newsletter.

**Upcoming events.** Let the landowner know what is planned for the coming months. For instance, a winter newsletter may discuss planting intentions and the crop acreage mix planned for spring. Landowners may be interested in upcoming sales or auctions, fairs, community events, road improvements, or business changes at the elevator or sale barn, depending on their involvement in the operation or ties to the community. An invitation to visit and tour the operation will let landlords know their involvement is welcome. A personal visit by the landowner provides a unique opportunity to show off accomplishments on the farm, discuss plans and goals, and develop a cordial personal relationship.

## Brevity

Try to keep the newsletter to two pages (preferably front and back of one page). More or less information may be appropriate to individual situations.

## Design considerations

Choose a simple, flexible design and stick with it. Stability in the design of a newsletter, as in its title, reflects on you. If you use a computer to prepare the newsletter, your word processor may include one or more templates, or patterns, from which to choose. Resist the temptation to decorate your publication with computer clipart or with lavish use of the many typefaces that may be available on your computer. Effective design contributes to the clarity and credibility of what you have to say.

# A Word from the Farmers

June 2001

An informative newsletter for our landowners

*Since the last time we wrote, we have wrapped up planting. We are now waiting for the much-needed rain to help out plant growth. After three years of extremely wet springs, this year's dry spring allowed us to get the river bottoms planted. Let us all hope we don't get washed away when it finally rains.*

*Here is an update on our progress in several areas. As always, we invite you to get in touch with us in person or by phone or e-mail if you have questions.*

*Joe Farmer*

## Crop progress

We finished planting May 13. Luckily, a small rain shower moved through on May 15 to help the corn and soybeans germinate. The corn and soybeans look good for now, but more rain is needed. As we reported in the last newsletter, the winter snows brought relief to the wheat crop. The wheat looks good.

## Weather update

The rain during mid-May really helped. Unfortunately, the information we get from Missouri Extension indicates the 90-day precipitation forecast is for below average precipitation. We have been in this situation before and we realize that it is not the quantity but the timing of the rain that matters most. We hope that luck will be on our side this year.

## Price wrap-up

Even with the dry forecast, prices have increased only slightly since our last newsletter. Cash soybeans are \$4.75/bushel, cash corn is \$2.24/bushel, and cash wheat is \$2.67/bushel. We have sold most of last year's crop and are looking to the future. We have been following the futures markets to help us determine what to expect this fall. The fall corn price looks better than the fall soybean price. We actually increased the number of acres in corn because of the price difference. The wheat price continues to be dismal, but with decent production, we should about break even.



The corn and soybeans are looking good.

## Technology tour

We have completed our first time of planting all soybean acres using no-till. We have adopted no-till planting because we think that by reducing erosion it is better for the land. Also, no-till planting reduces some of our labor costs because we don't need to spend time tilling the land. However, the acres we have planted using no-till the past two years have had slightly lower production than conventionally planted land.

## Upcoming events

The Fourth of July celebration is just around the corner. As usual, Richfield is expecting the return of many former residents for the festivities. A big parade and fireworks display are planned for the Fourth. If you are planning to be in the area during that time, we would be more than happy to give you a tour of the farm while you're here. We look forward to seeing you then, and we'll write again in September.

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