

Farmland owners: How much do you really know about farming on your land? What are your tenants' farming goals and how willing are they to make changes? From the 2008 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, 49 percent of tenants reported communicating with their landlords fewer than three times a year, and 11 percent never communicated with their landlords. The rest reported communicating more than eight times a year. However, as many as two-thirds of tenants have not discussed conservation practices with their landlords.

Here at Practical Farmers, we hear from many landowners who want to increase conservation on their farmland. If you are one of those landowners, start first with conversations with your tenants or farmer partners. You might be surprised at what you learn!

Practical Landowner Services helps farmland owners work with their farmer partners to plant cover crops and more. As preparation for that work, Sarah Carlson, PFI's Midwest cover crop research coordinator, has developed some good conversation starter questions:

1 Do the farmer partners own their own spraying equipment? Do they apply their own fertilizer? Pesticides?

When applications are outsourced, the service providers hired will get to farmers' operations when they can. Farmers say: "The smaller a part of a service provider's business they are, the lower they are on the list." The result can be application at the wrong time and less success. Also, the materials being used to control weeds or diseases may be closer to "one size fits all" than site-specific.

Farmers have also commented that if they apply their own fertilizers or pesticides, they are more likely to scout and, over time, to reduce the amount used – or to use several crop protection "tools" in rotation as opposed to solely depending on one tool. They also may be more able to learn and make changes. For example: Farmers who broadcast-apply pesticides might be interested in learning how to "band" instead if their landowners want them to reduce total herbicide usage.

2 What type of tillage practices do your farmer partners use a majority of the time? What time of the year do they till?

Reducing tillage in a short rotation – like corn-corn or corn-soybean – dramatically decreases the potential for soil erosion. Iowa's Nutrient Reduction Strategy shows 90 percent less phosphorus loss (phosphorus is attached to soil) when a farmer changes from tillage to no-till or reduced tillage.

Leaving the soil exposed increases loss. It's in landowners' best interests to protect their investment. Overall soil quality decreases with more tillage due to greater erosion potential and the physical disturbance to soil aggregates with more tillage.

If your tenant is using organically certified or certifiable practices, a certain amount of tillage or soil disturbance may be necessary to control weeds. But, again, ask about the number of tools the farmer partner uses to manage weeds, pests and diseases. Tools can include: timing of tillage, cover crops, crop rotation length and crop types, ridge tillage, disease and pest resilient hybrids or varieties, to name a few. Using many tools increases resilience and lessens dependence on one strategy. Also knowing the length of the rotation is important. Rotation length can affect the amount of tillage needed to protect cash crops. Ask if the rotation includes a mix of row crops and pasture-sod-building crops. The less time for sod-building crops in the rotation, the greater the soil exposure and potential for erosion.



Jeff DeWall does not use anhydrous as a nitrogen source because of landowner Helen Gunderson's environmental concerns.

3 Do your farming partners use chemicals and/or non-chemical pest management practices? Do they use genetically modified or non-genetically modified corn? Soybeans? Alfalfa?

Weeds and pests can become resistant to overuse of crop protection tools. You may decide that farmers using chemicals or biotechnology to protect cash crops may be too dependent on a narrow set of tools. Landowners interested in knowing more about which seeds and crop protection their tenants are using should ask more about how many strategies or tools are being used to control pests. It may be more difficult for your farmer partners to comply with your wishes for increased conservation if fewer tools are currently being used. Maybe suggest one change per year, so that your farmer partners can learn new management skills and how to incorporate other tools successfully.



Helen Gunderson used Practical Landowner Services to start a conservation conversation with your tenants. “I realized, as I listened to their conversation, how wise my tenants are.”

Ask about the number of tools the farmer uses to manage weeds, pests and diseases. Using many tools increases resilience and lessens dependence on one strategy.

4 Do your farming partners plant other cash crops besides corn and soybeans? Have they ever planted a cover crop?

The more plants beyond corn and soybeans, the more diversity we will have on the landscape. If your tenants have additional land where they plant crops other than corn or soybeans, they may be more willing to try cover crops or a more diverse rotation (both **in-field practices**) on your farm as well. **Edge-of-field practices** are also important to help reduce soil erosion and add diversity. Examples include grassed waterways, buffers and land in the Conservation Reserve Program. They should be on the farm where needed.

5 How many years will your farming partners be farming?

Farmers thinking about retirement, of course, are less likely to change their systems. The “old dog, new tricks” problem.

6 How many landlords do your farmer partners have? How many total acres do they farm in addition to yours?

The more farms your farmer partner works, the busier the farmer is – especially if those farms are spread over a long driving distance. The more acres and landlord relationships the farmer is managing, the better your communication needs to be in order to begin changes you want to see on your farm with that farmer partner over time.

Finally, there are some questions to ask yourself:

- How much income do you need to derive from the operation?
- How much are you willing to spend annually to maintain your asset?
- What are your farmer partners’ biggest concerns when you have conversations? (crop production, soil erosion, tiling, marketing crop, storage, etc)

With Practical Farmers’ help, Helen Gunderson held a good conversation this summer with two of her Pochahontas County farmer partners – Denny Flaherty and Jeff DeWall – and learned that they were more conservation-minded than she had originally thought. “In the past, I had told them that I would be more comfortable with a moderate rental rate if I knew they were moving toward using more environmentally-friendly practices,” Helens says. “I had been looking for a way to have a serious conversation with them about changes.” Practical Farmers provided that opportunity when Helen participated in Practical Landowner Services.

In preparation for the meeting, Helen emailed Denny and Jeff a list of questions, including:

- What were some of your fathers’ or grandfathers’ common practices that you would never do again because you have learned they are not environmentally sound?
- What are some environmentally-friendly practices that you have tried but that you have found do not fit well into your farming system?
- In what ways have you experimented (or are willing to experiment) with: lengthening or changing crop rotations? cover crops? using composted manure? decreasing use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides? attracting more pollinators? increasing organic matter and microbial activity in the soil and soil health?

Helen made it clear she wasn’t giving Denny and Jeff a writing assignment; she was just trying to set the groundwork for their upcoming discussion with Sarah Carlson about using different practices on her land. Through their conversation, Helen learned that Denny and Jeff already did less tillage, reduced their chemical use, and did not use anhydrous as the nitrogen source because they knew of her interest in conservation. Which brings up another good question landowners should ask: In what ways has your farming partner changed practices because of your conservation focus?

“Until we met this summer, I had no clue that avoiding anhydrous use was much more expensive for my tenants,” Helen reports. “I realized, as I listened to their conversation, how wise my tenants are.” This fall, Denny and Jeff are planting cover crops, and they will plant 70 acres of alfalfa in 2015.

Farmland owners and their farming partners:

We welcome your input on this article and additional questions. Please send them to erica@practicalfarmers.org.

Landowners:

If you might be interested in a PFI consultation with your farmer partner, contact Erica Andorf: erica@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661.