

LAND TRANSITION CASE STUDY

SKYLAR FALTER AND MATT PIROG



Land transition comes in many forms and involves many decisions between the parties involved. This case study focuses on beginning farmers stepping into a land and cattle operation. To learn more about our work in this area of farming, visit cfra.org/farmers.

2014

Skylar started farming at Lake House Farm and Prairie Plate Restaurant with little agriculture experience.

Matt grew up in rural Nebraska and began his farming experience at a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Research Farm, focusing on cover crop experiments and the student organic farm.

2015

Matt and Skylar started RhizoCity Farms, an urban farm, in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The farm's main focus was vegetables and herbs.

2020

The owners of 840 acres of land near Steinauer, Nebraska, contacted Matt and Skylar, asking if they would want to live on the land and operate a grasslands restoration and rotationally grazed cattle operation with the potential for multiple enterprises. Skylar and Matt excitedly accepted the opportunity.



CURRENT OPERATION - CHENEY CONSERVATION

Cheney Conservation is a cattle-based grassland conservation effort owned and managed by Alex McKiernan and Chloe Diegel. Matt is responsible for day-to-day operations of a contract grazing business on the land. In 2021, 400 yearling steers grazed as a single herd with daily moves to new paddocks, and during the 2022 grazing season, 330 yearling heifers were managed in much the same way.

Decision making is guided using holistic management principles. Matt and Alex meet regularly to discuss daily operations at Cheney. A bigger group of stakeholders, including children, grandparents, and a Natural Resources Conservation Service representative was convened in winter 2022 to develop a collective context and vision for the land.

As an employee, Matt and his family are able to make suggestions for additional enterprises they see as possibilities. This includes creating budgets for those enterprises and discussing plans with the landowners.

FOR EXAMPLE:



Grasslands restoration involves the removal of woody tree encroachment and this provides the opportunity for additional enterprises like cultivating mushrooms and value-added timber products. Matt had a growing interest and passion for fungi and brought a proposal to Alex to experiment with mushroom cultivation on several of the tree species that are being removed. In 2022, they are trialing oyster mushrooms and shiitake mushrooms on five different tree species.



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LANDOWNERS UNDERSTAND CHALLENGES

Because Matt and Skylar's landowners previously experienced the challenges of being beginning farmers they thoroughly understand the challenges young and beginning farmers face regarding land access and successfully growing a new business.



LIVING ON THE LAND



Being on the farm allows Matt and Skylar to have flexible schedules, more family time, and access to rural housing. Living on the land gives them easy access to research the area, experiment and grow their own enterprises, and develop more skills in agriculture. Additionally, it allows them to form a relationship with the land. They spent hundreds of hours surveying and observing the land, removing fencing, working with trees, and preparing the pastures.

“ Sometimes as a tenant you don't see the bigger picture, what kind of pressures, such as economic obligations, the landowner might be experiencing. ”
-Skylar Falter

FUTURE GOALS



- Skylar would like to start a value-added, home-based business
- Matt would like to further develop agroforestry skills and practices on the land.
- Both of them want to continue to plant 50 to 100 perennials a year.
- Matt and Skylar would like to see more families involved either here or elsewhere. Collaborative farming is a more sustainable, realistic, and holistic route when one family or one farmer cannot maintain various enterprises, and diversification is necessary to keep a farm afloat.

EMPLOYEE/LANDOWNER RELATIONSHIP



Matt and Skylar note the importance of understanding what communication methods your landowners prefer. In-person conversations are best for discussions or bringing up concerns.

Often, employees and landowners do not take the time to have big-picture, strategic planning conversations, which are important. The holistic management context and goals they developed together give them all a foundation to fall back on and check in to evaluate and discern whether they are still aligned.

“ Communication is key to fostering healthy relationships with landowners. Sometimes we don't always agree with the decisions, but decisions have to be made based on the whole context. ”
-Skylar Falter and Matt Pirog

“ We can shift and make changes as needed because we are not tied to one way of doing things. ”

-Matt Pirog

