Collaboration in conservation: Women landowners and their tenants

Nebraska Women in Agriculture Conference
February 20, 2020
Andrea Basche, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Angie Carter, Michigan Tech University
Mayrene Bentley, Landowner in Atchison County, Missouri
Dawn Nielsen, Landowner in Dodge County, Nebraska
Marilee Polacek, Landowner in Butler County, Nebraska

Project background

• Annual cropland contributes to soil and water quality degradation
  • Erosion rates in one year require decades to replace
  • Water pollution harms many communities

• Advancing conservation goals requires engaging women landowners
  • Women are under represented and under researched in conservation planning
  • 42% of Nebraska land is owned or co-owned by women

• Millions of acres of land will transition ownership over the next number of years and students will be a part of that
  • There are complex social and familial dynamics behind these transitions
  • Students future roles as producers and agricultural advisors will require an understanding of these dynamics to support successful outcomes
Project timeline

- Interviews with landowners and tenants (June 2019)
- Field trip to each of the three farms (August 2019)
- Students completed farm improvement plans over the course of the fall semester
- Students presented improvement plans to landowners and tenants on campus (December 2019)

Landowner collaborators

Marilee Polacek
Butler County
Nebraska

Dawn Nielsen
Dodge County
Nebraska

Mayrene Bentley
Atchison County
Missouri
Small Steps- Pressing On!

Polacek Farm

Landowner/Tenant Farmer Discussions

- Since taking over the decision making when my husband died in 2005, I have cash rented the farm. The farm had $100,000 debt and my banker advised that I needed to put the farm up for bids to get a higher cash rent.

- The highest bidder was my next tenant farmer. We met once a year to discuss what the next year’s rent would be, if there were any problems that needed my attention, and to sign the yearly lease.

- My current tenant farmer has been farming our land for the last five years. We meet every couple months to talk about how things are going. He lives nearby, and helps us out by clearing our driveway when we have heavy snows. Lately, he has done some custom work for us on some acres my daughter is taking over for conservation purposes.
Projects over the last 15 years

- Tiled 40 acres west of creek
- Seeded waterways
- Capped old well

- 2019 culvert project to connect front and back fields west of farm place
- Cover crop on crop land west of farm place
- Took 5 acres out of cash rent agreement so Katie could establish pollinator habitat
- Local bee keeper installed 2 bee boxes near fruit trees.

New Projects and Goals

Buffer strip along Skull creek to stop erosion along creek bank/CRP project

Take 12 acres East of driveway out of cash rent and establish grass/vegetable garden/fruit or nut trees

Increase farm income by selling eggs, garden produce, and baked goods

Use rotational grazing on 12 acres for chickens and sheep

Building chicken tractor from old grain wagon to help with free ranging chickens
Recent wet years have made this field less productive.

In the 90’s and new well was drilled for the farm because of high nitrate levels in the existing well.

Sought help through NRCS to see what could be done to help with this problem.

We have started a paper trail of conservation practices with Katie as the operator.

Slow process and we are still working with local agencies and our current tenant farmer to make these changes.

SARE Project

- Andrea and Angie came to our farm, discussed plans for SARE project.
- Several teleconference calls with other participants to work out details for on farm student visit.
- Tenant/farmer, NRD representative, UNL team, and Landowner shared history, projects and goals for the farm with the students.
SARE Project Recommendations

Diverse cover crop mix over all crop land

Convert 12 acres to grassland with help of NRCS

Corn-Corn-Soybean rotation to increase crop residue and hold back erosion from hills

Switch from cash rent to a cost-share rental agreement

Tile 12 acres to help with run off from the hills

SARE Project Reflections:

Pro:
- Good opportunity to obtain input from a variety of sources
- Improved communication between landowners and tenant farmer regarding common goals for the farm
- Concise recommendations for tenant farmer to help with improvement of yields, etc

Con:
- Limited student involvement with landowners after the initial visit
- Lack of opportunity for all presenters of information to hear what each individual group was presenting on the day of the farm tour
- Unpractical or costly recommendations such as tiling, rather than exploring other conservation measures

Today On The Farm

- Chickens and Egg Production
- Katahdin Sheep
- Rotational Grazing
- Fruit Orchard and Garden
Long Term Goals

- Poultry and Sheep
- Fruits, berries, and vegetables
- Soil Health
- Converting to Grassland
- Value Added Products

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Dawn Nielsen, landowner in Dodge County
UNL Visit to “The Farm” August 2019

Prairie Buffer Strips: Jeremiah Schultz NRCS
Riparian Buffer: Becky Pieper, NRCS

Buffer established in 2004.

Tenant Farmer: Russel
Landowner: Dawn Carper Nielsen

Carper Farm Place in mid 50s

Sustainable Agriculture Model from the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)
1955
Pebble Creek Watershed

2018
My Goals for The Farm

- **Sustainability:**

  Originally hoped to move to organic production, thus encouraged renter to plant alfalfa so it could be certified organic after 2 years.

  Less tilling and use of chemicals

  Benefits to the soil “Subterranean organisms thrive in unplowed soils.”

  + Prevent erosion

  Investigated prairie buffer strips to address the “head cut” on the north fence line in 2015

  + Maintain the Riparian buffer in the corner pasture established in 2004
Tenant farmer Goals

- Produce feed for his feedlot cattle and cow-calf operation.
- “Russel’s goal is to get as much tonnage as possible every growing season off of this field in order to feed his cattle in the winter.”
- “A production challenge that Russel is facing is that the alfalfa isn’t producing as much as it should be. His average yield per acre is 3.1 tons per year. Average alfalfa production in Dodge County in 5 tons per year.”

UNL Student Proposals to meld landowner and tenant farmer goals

- Crop rotation plan of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and grass (rye cover crop after soybeans; oats companion crop planted with alfalfa)
- Year-round Forage Plan (winter rye, sorghum sudan grass or forage sorghum for hay and/or silage)
- Convert the cropland to pasture so farmer could pasture his cow-calf operation (big bluestem, Indiangrass, side-oats grama and sand lovegrass)
- Nutrient management (Low pH levels found by soil testing affecting current alfalfa yield)
- Companion crop for current alfalfa stand (inter-seed oats short term, orchard grass long term)
- Forage rotation after alfalfa rather than corn/soybean (pearl millet and triticale)
Additional suggestions from UNL proposals

- Addition of Grass Buffer to address the head cut on the north fence line. (NRCS program: CRP Prairie Field Buffer Strip)
- Development of Lease Agreement.
  - Cash rent now ($185) below average cash-rent for area ($200)
  - Lime agreement. Ag lime incorporated before next alfalfa planting.
  - Long term lease rather than year to year

Results of landowner tenant meeting

- Feedback from presentations
  - Tenant was favorably impressed. Probably resonated to more “traditional” proposals for crop rotation. Discussed lime application ideas.
- Lease agreement
  - Tenant was open to a more detailed lease agreement. Landowner will adapt a lease agreement template to share with tenant before 2020 planting season.
- Increased CRP acres
  - Landowner contacted Jake Koenig, Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist with NRCS to discuss new Pollinator Habitat for a one acre “corner” to the east of the place.
  - After UNL presentations also talked to Dodge County FSA about 30 foot Prairie Field Buffer strip on north fence line.
30 ft Prairie Buffer Strip along north fence line
Tenant reactions to increased CRP

• Corner Pollinator Habitat
  • As the “corner” was difficult for his planter to maneuver, he was quite happy to have us take over that acre. He offered to help with planting by borrowing a Pheasants Forever drill in Scribner. Will work on that together in the spring.
  
  • Prairie Field Buffer Strip on north fence line. Agreed to wait another 2 years or so when alfalfa is done to do site prep and planting.
  
  • He knows I like “my” grasses.

My Final Responses to UNL Project

• Collaboration between landowner and tenant has improved by having a shared experience hosted by an outside source.

• Really impressive project proposals and presentation by UNL students was a learning experience for all parties.

• Encouraged by the next generation’s sensitivity to my past efforts and hopes for the land. “Dawn values the land, its history, and its ability to provide human resources. She wants her land to have a positive impact on climate and global change.”

• If we care for the land, the land will care for us. (Aldo Leopold)

• Personal sense of affirmation from Andrea, Angie, NRCS professionals, Center for Rural Affairs and UNL students.
Student reflections and learning

• Students recognize the value of incorporating landowners in decision making and how this impacts the long term viability an operation

“Each of these people has a certain vision for the future of the land and decisions must be made in the best interest of the farm. This is why these ‘layers’ are critical, because they will determine how much money the farm makes, how healthy the soil is for future generations, and who will be passed the farm in the future. All of these are extremely important and are happening all over Nebraska and the U.S. every day.”

Student reflections and learning

• The project shifted perceptions of women landowners, and how many women are involved in decision-making

“The most surprising thing that I learned in this course was how much these women landowners cared for their farmland even though some of them were away from the farm for many years. They all cared deeply about their land and wanted what was best for it. I think I was unaware of this before because I always perceived people that inherited ground just wanted the money from the land and that they didn’t care what happened to it. I always thought they would rent the ground to the highest bidder and not care what happened to it.”
Student reflections and learning

• Many students reflected on the value of collaborating with NRCS

“I did not know that the NRCS office is so willing to help people. If one of my future clients is interested in land conservation, I would not be afraid to call the local NRCS office to ask for help.”

Thank you!

Andrea Basche
Dept. of Agronomy and Horticulture
abasche2@unl.edu