

A close-up photograph of several young green seedlings with two leaves each, growing out of a black seedling tray. The soil is dark and moist. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue sky. In the top right corner, there is a dark blue rectangular box with a green vertical bar on its left side, containing the title text in white.

Plain English Guide FOR BEGINNING **FARMERS**

Farming is a general term consisting of many major enterprises. Hobby farming, gardening or specialized farming, are all occupations that require much planning, knowledge, capital, and risk management.

We designed this guide to provide general considerations and agriculture related information primarily for new, beginning or absentee farmers. Information contained in this guide is presented in a frequently asked question format for an easy to read document, providing knowledge and understanding of general agriculture.



WHAT IS FARMING?

Farming is the practice of growing crops, aquaculture, forestry, livestock, dairy, poultry, fuel and fiber. The roots of farming began in the area of present day Turkey and the Middle East about 10,000 years ago. Farming changed very little from early times until about the 1700s. In the 1700s, an agriculture revolution took place which led to a large increase in the production of crops. In the 1850s the industrial revolution spilled over to the farm with new mechanized methods which increased production rates. By the 1970s, it was suggested that half of the world's working population was employed in agriculture.

WHY FARM?

There are varied reasons why individuals choose to farm. Often reasons range from being raised on a farm, thus retaining memories from childhood, to individuals buying or inheriting land and utilizing land to its full potential. Others view farming as an opportunity for self-employment and a means of income for family. However, individuals who decide to farm must recognize that farming is a business which must be treated as such.

GROW



WHERE DO I START?

Individuals desiring to farm, whether part or full-time, should take the initiative to learn as much as possible about the enterprise(s) of interest. There are many ways to gain information and knowledge including: talking to other farmers, visiting your County Extension Agents, talking with university specialists, reading farm related magazines and talking to local USDA personnel and their specialists. Assisting another farmer with all stages of production, from planting to harvesting and marketing is a great way to gain hands on experience.

There are major considerations when investigating farm enterprises such as: the cost of production, land, labor, harvest requirements, specialized equipment needed, if any, storage requirements, marketing plans, and financial needs are a few.

Upon determining land requirements, another consideration is to determine your appropriate land use. This information is determined using a soil survey which identifies the best and most appropriate use of your land. This information can be obtained from your Natural Resources Conservation Service. Additionally, your local County Extension Agent can assist in determining land use.

WHAT ARE MY LAND OPTIONS?

There are several means of obtaining land, including ownership, lease, family owned and heirs property.

OWNED LAND

Land ownership is ideal. You can control and apply management practices that will increase the value of the property. You can also use the land for collateral for other purchases. Consider identifying the best use of your land based on its' soil type.

LONG TERM LEASE OR RENT

Long Term leases are best if you are serious about farming. It will ensure that you get the best value from the soil amendments that you apply. In Addition, it will allow you to install conservation improvement practices. Follow general guidelines such as; length of contract, cost per acre, and use of property.

FAMILY OWNED LAND

If there is good open communication within the family, farming family owned land is a very good option. Written guidelines are a very important part of the family communication process. Consideration should be given to upkeep, land improvements, soil amendments, building structures and other issues of investment. Guidelines should also include other terms and conditions, such as; length of agreement, and use as collateral.

Utilizing Family Owned Land with Legal Agreement

Family members who wish to farm the family farm should seek legal advice to ensure they are following the guidelines of their state. However, a contract should be developed with general guidelines identifying terms and conditions, the life of the contract, long term input protection, upkeep, improvements and other conditions. The contract should be signed by all family members involved and notarized.



HEIRS PROPERTY

Heirs property is land that has been passed down informally from generation to generation. In most cases, it involves landowners who died without a will. Heirs land is owned in common by all of the heirs, regardless of whether they live on the land, pay taxes, or has ever lived on the land.

FAMILY OWNED LAND



Considerations regarding Heirs Property include:

- Decisions regarding the use of the land must be agreed upon by everyone entitled to the land.
- Difficulty in acquiring loans, grants, and governmental assistance based on property ownership because there is no clear title.
- Owners do not own a specific part of the land but rather a divided fraction.
- Owners have the right to use and occupy the entire property regardless of their percentage of interest.
- Owners can do whatever they want with their own individual interest without consulting others.
- Owners must pay property taxes, keep unwanted people off the land and cover basic repair cost; however, if only one owner pays, it does not increase ownership.
- Owners must split any profits gained from the use of the land among all owners.
- Owners have limited liability for debts and losses.
- Any owner may ask the court to order a Petition Sale.
- One owner could force a court ordered sale of the entire property so that all the descendants can cash out.
- Any owner can seek to obtain a Tenancy-In-Common Agreement, which set out ownership rights and responsibilities among all of the owners. Such an agreement can give a particular owner the right to use a specific part of the land.



How am I affected by Heirs Property?

If you are farming Heirs Property you should take every precaution to seek a Power-of-Attorney to safeguard your investment from other heirs. As an heir, if you produce a crop without having a written agreement, all heirs are entitled to their share of the profits. Additionally, long term input used to produce a crop can be lost, due to other heirs retaining the property, after improvements have been made. Another concern is the lack of obtaining operating loans because the land nor crop can be used as collateral.

You may Farm Land with a Gentlemen's Agreement

Farming heirs land or any land using a gentlemen's agreement is very risky. Under a gentlemen's agreement, there is no security that the agreement will be honored by all parties. Additionally, if a formal complaint is lodged against the producer, all heirs are entitled to their share of the profits obtained from the sale of the produce. It is advisable that the producer go through their state's legal process to secure their investment. In order to get a loan or financial assistance, a power of attorney is needed.



WHAT REGULATIONS SHOULD I BE AWARE OF?

There are many local, state, and federal regulations that affect a farming operation. Beginning farmers should check with their local USDA, Natural Resource Conservation Service and their Farm Service Agency offices regarding potential land purchases and lease land to ensure that the proposed land is not already committed in an existing contract with one of their cost share programs. They should also inquire about requirement for highly erodible and wetland concerns. Additionally, an investigation should be made on the proposed enterprise to be produced. Most all enterprises have some form of regulations regarding production and marketing. Some regulations to consider includes: selling produce at local farmer's markets, regulating livestock and fish, producing poultry is regulated regarding odor control, and other environmental issues. Additional regulations include: land use, waste disposal, and water quality regulations that might impact one's farming operation. All USDA cost share, other sign-up programs, and disaster programs have regulations for participants.

WHAT WILL I PRODUCE?

Careful thought should be given regarding what to produce on your farm. New and beginning farmers must consider such points as: land capability, acres available for use, cost of potential inputs, equipment and labor needs, availability, and market. Farmers with limited acreage, should consider those enterprises that produce the most using limited land. Many crops planted on limited acreage require high input, specialized equipment, intense labor, concerns regarding storage, perishability and risk management.

WHAT WILL SELL IN THE MARKET?

There are generally two types of markets, traditional and niche or specialty markets. Market pricing are based on supply and demand. Regional and some local area prices are available for traditional market crops. There is marketing information for niche or specialty crops, but the information may not be readily available. Producers are encouraged to seek market availability prior to producing a crop. This can be achieved in several ways, including: seeking information from large outlets on their specifications, opportunities to sell, volume, price range, and delivery needs. In other markets, you should determine their specifications and possible prices. For price and the probability of producing niche crops, a survey can be an effective means of determining local, area needs. Producers are encouraged to develop a marketing plan for each crop produced.

WHAT ARE THE EXISTING MARKETS?

Most agricultural produce has available markets. Vegetables in most cases have local and regional markets. Most livestock, row crops, fish and timber have local and regional markets. There are opportunities available for farmers with certain produce to book a portion of their expected produce prior to harvest. This allows farmers to lock in potential profit when prices are volatile. Specialty crop prices are generally set by regional markets, but just as other produce, price is based on local demand for the produce.

WHAT IS THE LAND CAPABLE OF PRODUCING (crops, forestry, livestock, etc.)?

Beginning farmers should know their land's capabilities. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office should be able to provide an updated soil survey for your farm. The soil survey will provide information on the various soil types and suggested use. Additionally, the NRCS and Cooperative Extension, County Agents have soil experts who can assist farmers with land capabilities information.

WHAT WILL GROW BEST IN YOUR CLIMATE?

Information on what grows best for your climate can be obtained from your local Cooperative Extension Agent, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency or other agricultural outlets. Crops identified for growing in your area is based on several factors, including soil type, daily heat accumulation, length of growing season, average rainfall during the growing season for your area, and first and last frost dates are some variables. USDA Agricultural Research Service along with Land Grant Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Stations perform extensive research on crops best suited for your area.





WHAT TYPE OF EQUIPMENT OR TOOLS DO I HAVE?

New and beginning farmers should develop an inventory of all equipment owned and conduct a thorough investigation of equipment needed for the enterprise you are interested in producing.

Row crop producers need more specialized equipment for breaking ground or no-till, cultivation, planting, spray and harvesting. Forestry production generally utilize the least amount of equipment after planting. Livestock requires adequate facilities, a hay outlet, tractor, rotary mower, etc. Vegetables can be profitable on small acreage and can be produced with limited equipment depending on the crops and the labor you are willing to commit.

WHAT LABOR FORCE IS REQUIRED?

Labor and equipment are two major capital outlays in a farming operation. There are enterprises that require minimum labor output, while others are labor intense. Some enterprise labor cost is offset by the use of equipment, while other enterprises require intense labor outlay throughout the entire process or at certain time during the production. New and beginning farmers should thoroughly investigate potential labor requirements on their desired enterprise.

HOW MUCH LAND DO I NEED?

Land is a major requirement in a farming operation. Most animal and row crop enterprises require many acres of land, whereas, many horticultural, vegetable, and other niche crops can be profitable on limited or small acreage.



DO I NEED A PLAN?

There are several plans a farmer should consider developing in an effort to maximize return on their farming enterprise. Several plans may be required if farmers plan to participate in some USDA programs, and others may be required to participate in state, or local agricultural programs. Plans to consider, but not limited to are:

1 Conservation Plan

A conservation plan is a tool designed to help you better manage the natural resources on your farm. It will contain the record of decisions that is mutually agreed upon by you and a conservationist for treatment for each unit of your land.

2 Forest Management Plan if applicable

A forest management/stewardship plan is a working guide that allows you as a landowner to maximize a mix of forest benefits, including wildlife, timber, recreation, aesthetic value and other benefits.

3 Financial Management Plan

A financial management plan will help you evaluate your financial situation and explore alternatives that will help you make informed decisions about the future directions of your farm.

4 Farm Management Plan

A farm management plan is a written document that direct business decisions and define what is most important to your farm.



PLAN

IS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND EDUCATION INFORMATION AVAILABLE?

Technical assistance and educational information is available from the following sources:

USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the primary federal agency that works with private landowners to help them conserve, maintain and improve their natural resources. The agency emphasizes voluntary, science-based conservation, technical assistance, partnerships: incentive based programs, and cooperation problem solving at the community level.

As part of the 2014 Farm Bill, NRCS promotes both technical and financial assistance in the form of cost share from the USDA to assist landowners in completing approved conservation practices.

USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA)

USDA RMA promotes, support, and regulate sound risk management solutions to preserve and strengthen the economic stability of America's agricultural producers.

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)

USDA FSA administers farm commodity, crop insurance, credit, environmental, conservation, and emergency assistance programs for farmers and ranchers.

USDA Rural Development (RD)

USDA RD programs are established to improve the economy and quality of life in rural America.

Land-Grant Colleges and Universities

Land-grant Universities' mission is to provide teaching of practical agriculture, sciences, military science and engineering. Key components of the land-grant system is the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Stations, the Cooperative Extension System including the 1890 land-grant colleges and universities, (Historical Black institutions) and the 1990 land-grant colleges and universities (Historical Native America institutions).

1890 Land-Grant Institutions

1890 Land-Grant institutions' services primary focus is the needs and issues affecting small, limited resources and the underserved farmers and landowners.



Agricultural Experiment Stations

Experiment Stations are scientific research centers that investigate difficulties and improvements to food production, forestry and other natural resources. Experiment Stations provide unbiased research based information that benefits the farmers in their region.

Cooperative Extension

Cooperative Extension is a federal partner of the United States Department of Agriculture, whose mission is to disseminate research-based information to the population. Extension's goal is to improve the lives and well-being of people and communities in the areas of agriculture, family and consumer science, youth and community development. Extension utilizes a team of agents and specialist to extend land-grant universities' lifelong educational programs to the community they serve.

Through the Cooperative Extension, there is a vast amount of educational information, educational meetings, field days, tours, and hands-on demonstrations, with research information and technical information available to farmers and landowners.

State Forestry Agencies

Many state forestry agencies have service foresters that work with landowners to improve forestry on the ground. Service foresters are assigned specific counties or regions in your state and tend to have a good sense of local conditions, and the threats and opportunities they present. Service foresters can also help access government grant and cost-share programs. In many states, service foresters provide free walk-throughs with woodland owners and offer advice for health maintenance and woodland improvement. In some states, service foresters can also write management plans. Some states charge fees for services.

State Department of Agriculture

State Department of Agriculture focus on fostering a healthy economy, environmental and social climate for agriculture by developing, promoting and regulating agricultural businesses, protecting agricultural and aquaculture resources, enforcing laws and promoting an understanding to citizens, the diversity of agriculture, its heritage and its contribution to the state.

Farmers' Cooperative, Associations and Institutes

Farmers' Cooperatives are groups of farmers with similar interests, who work together in an effort to increase goods and services for the entire group. The group concept allows farmers greater bargaining power than individual farmers.

Private Non Profit Organizations

A nonprofit organization is an organization whose purpose is something other than making a profit. Nonprofit organizations are often dedicated to furthering a particular or advocating for a particular program or point of view. In agriculture many nonprofit organizations assist with outreach to promote participation in a particular program, farm or natural resources.

Farmer Organizations

There are national organizations such as the American Farm Bureau, the National Farmers Union and the National Future Farmers of America who provides education and benefits to their members.

Farm Commodity Groups

For most of the commodities grown in the United States there are commodity associations that promote their commodity with education, technical assistance and marketing. There are state affiliates and sometimes local organizations. Examples are Cattleman Association, Poultry Producers, and Cotton Council.



IS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE?

Financial Assistance is available from the following:

- USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service
- USDA: Farm Service Agency
- Farm Credit (Lending)
- Development Authority (In some states)
- Local Banks (Lending)
- Small Business Administration (Lending)

WHAT USDA-NRCS PROGRAMS AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE ARE AVAILABLE?

NRCS offers an array of programs and financial assistance in six broad focus areas of the 2014 farm bill; those programs are:

Agriculture Management Assistance (AMA) Programs

This program is limited to 16 states, where participation in the Federal Crop program is historically low. With a contract option of 10 years, AMA provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to voluntarily address issues such as water management, water quality, and erosion control by incorporating conservation into their farming operations.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP promotes two types of payments through five-year contracts: annual payments for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing practices, and supplemental payment for adopting a resources conserving crop rotation.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in order to address natural resources, concerns, and deliver environmental benefits such as; improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion, sedimentation, improved, or created wildlife habitat.

Producers agree up to multi-year contract payments for undertaking new conservation management systems, or to cover a portion of the cost of installing specific conservation practices.

The USDA support producers interested in conserving and improving natural resources on their farms and ranches. EQIP participants install or implement structural, vegetative, and management practices, like improving irrigation efficiency, restoring pasture, or nutrient and pest management on eligible agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.

In return through a contractual agreement, NRCS provides financial cost-share assistance and technical assistance.

Agricultural Conservative Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservative Easement Program provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands, wetlands, and their related benefits. Land protected by land easements provides additional public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, wildlife habitat and protection of open space.

Healthy Forestry Reserve Program (HFRP)

The purpose of the Healthy Forest Reserve Program is to assist landowners on a voluntary basis, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private land through easement, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

RCPP promotes coordination between the NRCS and its partners, in an effort to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and through program contracts or easement agreements. Partners agreements generally valid up to five years.

The Natural Resources Conservation Services also provide financial and technical assistance for other initiative to assist landowners including;

What Conservation Practices are Available

There are a number of conservation practices available. The type of practice is based on local need.

Example of Conservation Practices are:

- High Tunnels (Hoop Houses)
- Irrigation
- Rotational Grazing
- Heavy Use Area
- Fences
- Livestock Pipelines
- Terraces
- Ponds
- Prescribed Burning
- Cover Crops

ARE THERE ANY ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS?

Yes, there are many environmental concerns. Information is available from:

- USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Cooperative Extension
- State Department of Natural Resources
- Farm Organizations (Farm Bureau)
- Commodity Organizations (cattlemen association)

WHAT ARE MY LIABILITIES?

As any other occupation, there are liabilities such as: weather, diseases and price fluctuation to consider. Risks can be minimized by participation in Crop Insurance. USDA Risk Management Agency can be a source of information.

ACRONYMS MOST COMMONLY USED BY USDA

AIG	Adjusted Gross Income	FSFL	Farm Storage Loan
AFO	Animal Feeding Operation	FW	Farmed Wetland
BMP	Best Management Practices	GIS	Geographic Information System
CCRP	Continuous Conservation Reserve Program	GRP	Grassland Reserve Program
CIG	Conservation Innovative Grant	HEL	Highly Erodible Land
CMS	Conservation Management System	IWM	Irrigation Water Management
CNMP	Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan	LRSSF	Limited Resource Small Scale Farmer
COE	Corp of Engineers	LRF	Limited Resource Farmer
CW	Converted Wetland	LIP	Livestock Indemnity Program
CREP	Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program	LFP	Livestock Forage Program
CTA	Conservation Technical Assistance	LDP	Loan Deficiency Program
DC	District Conservationist	NHEL	Non-highly Erodible Land
DCP	Direct and Counter Cyclical Program	NAP	Non-insured Assistance Program
EA	Environmental Assessment	NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
EBI	Environmental Benefit Index	PL	Payment Limitation
EI	Erodibility Index	RC&D	Resource Conservation and Development
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentive Program	RD	Rural Development
ECP	Emergency Conservation Program	RMA	Risk Management Agency
EWP	Emergency Watershed Program	RMS	Resource Management System
FA	Financial Assistance	TA	Technical Assistance
FPP	Farmland Protection Program	TSP	Technical Service Provider
FRPP	Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program	WHIP	Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
FSA	Farm Service Agency	WRP	Wetland Reserve Program
FLP	Farm Loan Program	W	Wetland



James and Isabelle Ford with Square O Consulting LLC have a long history of working with landowners through the rural south. James a fourth-generation farmer worked 38 years with USDA and 10 years as a private natural resource consultant. Isabelle is an engineer with 31 years of experience in design and regulatory with a concentration in training and module development. While conducting workshops and training, we discovered the need to create a document that will help make the language barrier for farmers easier to understand. This publication, *Plain English Guide for Beginning Farmers* is a start to help beginning farmers and rural landowners have a better understanding of some of the processes involved in farming. We hope this will make a difference to the farming community.

For Additional Information Contact:



Square O Consulting, LLC

Square O Consulting, LLC

P.O. Box 71956

Newnan, Georgia 30271

615-483-6825

squareoconsulting@gmail.com

www.squareoconsulting.com

USDA Service Delivery Agencies Contacts:

Natural Resource Conservation Service

www.nrcs.usda.gov

Farm Service Agency

www.fsa.usda.gov

Rural Development

www.rd.usda.gov

Guide Contributors:

Square O Consultant Executive Staff

Cliff Hampton, Contractor

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The Plain English Guide for Beginning Farmers is designed to assist new and beginning farmers in obtaining a basic understanding of the many considerations involved in farming. This guide is not intended to cover all aspects of agriculture such as; a comprehensive list of information providers, services providers, research based technical information nor legal information pertaining to farming. This guide is for educational purposes only.