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Selling Conserved Farmland and Advancing Viability

A Practical Guide to the Final Stage of Buy-Protect-Sell Projects

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this guidebook is to outline equitable, replicable models for transferring protected farmland in a way that sustains agricultural viability, ensures long-term land stewardship, and increases access for historically underserved farmers. It focuses specifically on the “sell” stage of Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) projects — a strategy used by land trusts and conservation partners to purchase, protect, and thoughtfully transfer farmland.

This guide draws from nearly a decade of collaborative projects undertaken in Jefferson County, Washington, by Jefferson Land Trust and the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative. It reflects the lessons learned from multiple farmland transfers, each designed to balance conservation goals with equitable land access and long-term farm viability. The guidebook is outlined in the following sections:

The **Overview** section introduces the purpose and audience of the guidebook, emphasizing that this is a resource for land trusts, agencies, and community-based organizations aiming to advance farmland preservation and inclusive land transfer strategies.

The **Background** section explores national and regional trends in farmland loss and highlights the urgent need to develop land access models that interrupt extractive real

estate dynamics and support a new generation of farmers. It details how the LandWorks Collaborative emerged as a response to these pressures and became a model for community-based land access work.

The ***Process for Buy-Protect-Sell*** section offers a step-by-step guide to implementing a values-based, transparent farmer selection process during the “Sell” stage of buy-protect-sell projects. This includes how to structure planning and selection committees, craft accessible Requests for Proposals (RFPs), evaluate candidates, and incorporate mechanisms – like restrictive covenants – to ensure permanent affordability and agricultural productivity.

The ***Appendices: Example Resources*** section provides practical tools including sample RFPs, application forms, ranking criteria, and legal language to help organizations replicate and adapt these methods.

Our findings suggest that farmland transfers must be designed to counter historic inequities, reduce land speculation, and promote long-term agricultural productivity. To address this, we recommend utilizing collaborative models that support farmland conservation, agricultural viability, equitable land access, and permanent affordability. These strategies create pathways for farmers to secure land and contribute meaningfully to resilient food systems.



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Photo by Deja View Photography.

Overview

Purpose

The purpose of this guidebook is to:

- Outline equitable farmland access models rooted in collaboration among various stakeholders,
- Describe successful Buy-Protect-Sell transactions and strategies in Jefferson County, WA, that are replicable to conservation practitioners nationwide,
- Provide guidelines and templates for conservation entities to utilize when selling or leasing protected farmland, and
- Share insightful lessons learned over nearly a decade and highlight key takeaways.

Audience

The intended audiences for this guidebook are organizations and entities involved in any of the following activities: farmland protection, land access efforts, farm resource support, and those wishing to engage in similar initiatives. This includes, but is not limited to, land trusts, nonprofit organizations, local, state, and federal governments, port authorities, cooperatives, resource providers, land-grant universities and extension, and state conservation agencies.

Note from the Authors: How to Use this Guidebook

This guidebook is sorted into three primary parts: the background for these equitable farmland access initiatives (why we're undertaking them and how collaborative partnerships make them possible); the process of recruiting, finding, and selecting a successful farmer to transfer protected farmland to; and templates you can use to conduct your own accessible and transparent selection process, resulting in protected farmland that sustains or increases agricultural productivity in your region.

This guidebook acknowledges that both farmland ownership and transfer in the U.S. are deeply intertwined with historical and ongoing social injustices. From the dispossession of Indigenous lands to discriminatory policies like the Homestead Act and more recent USDA lending practices that have favored white landowners, systemic inequities have shaped who owns farmland – and who has been excluded. These patterns have enabled generational wealth accumulation for some while denying access and opportunity to communities of color and other marginalized groups. Farmland ownership transfers often perpetuate these disparities by keeping land within already privileged groups. This guidebook aims to outline a process that allows conservation entities to interrupt the conventional real estate market – property by property – by slowing it down to make space for identifying viable, productive farmers, particularly those who have historically been excluded from land access.

This guidebook is primarily focused on the “sell” component of Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) projects. We understand that most land trusts and other conservation entities are familiar with the methods for purchase and protection of properties and conservation easements, however, there is less knowledge about, and experience with, how to create the conditions for the successful, equitable transfer of farmland. As funding for BPS projects becomes more widely available across the country – and in acknowledgment of the persistent inequities in farmland access – we are sharing our approach to conducting a fair, transparent, and effective farmer selection process. In addition, this guidebook includes an example of an affordability restrictive covenant that can be recorded on the title of conserved farmland. This covenant limits the appreciation of the land's value, helping to ensure it remains affordable for working farmers in perpetuity.



Photo by Sarah Wright Photography.



Photo by Chrissie White.

Background

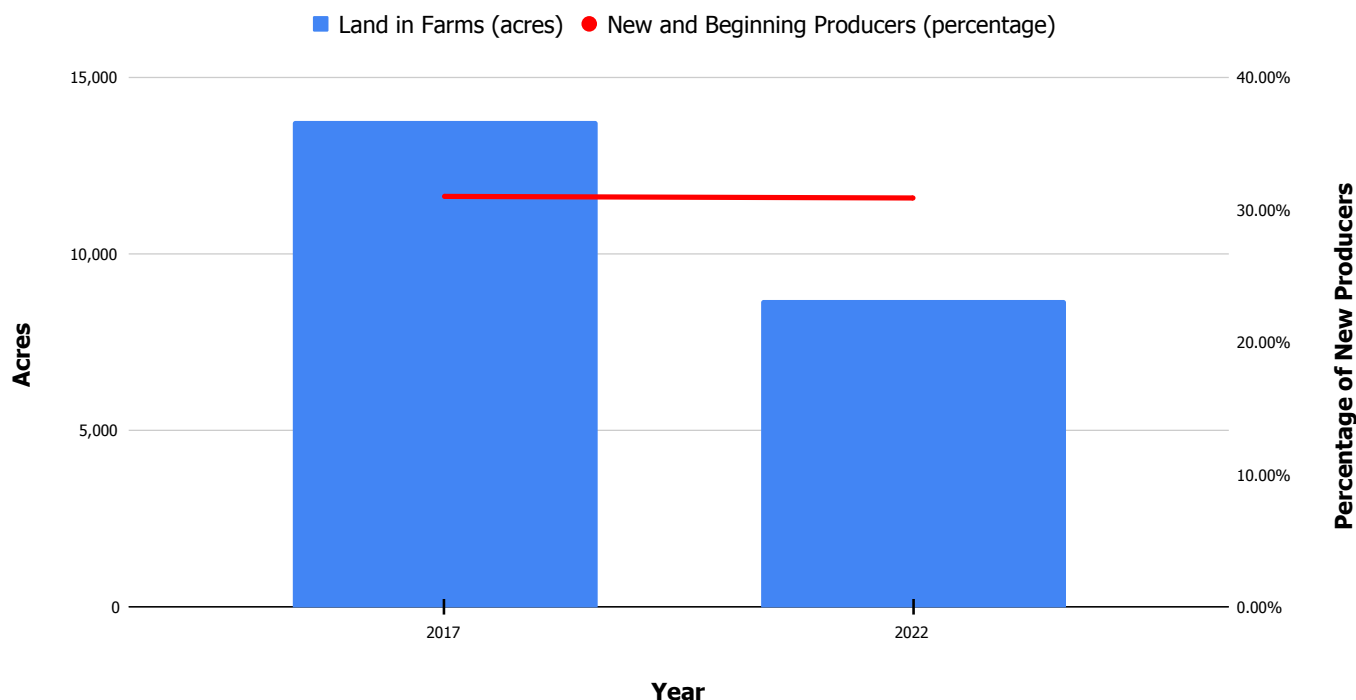
Background and Current Conditions of Agriculture

Farmers are encountering numerous obstacles to entering the agricultural sector – particularly securing affordable land, whether through ownership or leaseholds. According to the American Farmland Trust, an estimated 41 percent of agricultural lands, or nearly 300 million acres, are projected to change hands by 2035 in the United States¹. In Washington State alone, farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate – over 800,000 acres lost since 2017, according to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, reflecting a 5.6 percent decline that threatens the future of farming in the state².

Similar trends are evident in Jefferson County, Washington, where the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture reports a decline in the total number of farms and the total farmland acreage. However, despite this overall reduction, the proportion of new and beginning producers in the county as a percentage of total farmers has remained steady at an average of 30 percent since 2017, suggesting a strong and sustained pipeline of incoming farmers that can sustain the sector³.

Jefferson County, WA Change in Farmland Acreage and New Producers

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture 2017-2022



This graph illustrates the number of acres in farmland (blue bars) in Jefferson County, WA in 2017 and 2022, showing the decrease. The graph also shows the percentage of farmers that are “new and beginning producers” (red line) which has remained consistent between 2017 and 2022.

Innovative approaches to farmland access and land transfer highlight the complexity of farmers securing land and underscore the importance of providing farmers legal guidance, collaborative communication, and sound business planning to ensure long-term farm sustainability⁴.

Practitioners working in land preservation, agriculture, and land stewardship agree there is an ongoing need for stronger support of land access and land transfer initiatives for both entering and exiting generations of farmers. In 2006, this need led to the formation of Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative (LWC or LandWorks) based out of Jefferson County, Washington.

The following section describes how Jefferson Land Trust, a partner of the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative, undertook a series of land transfer projects using different models, the development of processes to facilitate equitable land transfer, and the role of collaboration among key stakeholders.

Land Access Background: Farmers, Land Opportunities, and Partner Projects

In 2016, understanding the increasing threats to farmland and to affordable farmland access, Jefferson Land Trust and the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative embarked on a new land transfer initiative of a 152-acre historic farm that was for sale. The goals of this first project were threefold:

- To place a restrictive easement on the property to ensure its preservation in perpetuity, and its affordability for the new farm buyer,
- To widely promote the opportunity of purchase through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process to select a farmer who could present a business and operations plan for the farm that would contribute to the local agriculture sector and economy, and
- To establish selection criteria for LandWorks partners to use for similar future projects.

This first project set into motion an iterative series of successful farm transfer and access opportunities in Jefferson County, each building upon the discoveries of the last, with improvements made to the selection process with each subsequent project. Between 2016-2025, LandWorks and Jefferson Land Trust conducted four farmer selection processes for protected farmland, each bringing new opportunities to learn and develop increasingly equitable processes to connect farmers with the land that they need to sustain their businesses and the viability of a rural county.

Subsequently, in 2019, the LandWorks Collaborative advertised an RFP and found a farmer to lease a 16-acre property that Jefferson Land Trust owned; in 2021-2022 the LWC helped the Kawamoto family in Quilcene, WA identify a farmer to purchase their historic 148-acre property that had been owned and farmed by the family for more than 100 years through a public RFP process; and in 2023-2025 Jefferson Land Trust purchased a 47-acre property called North Beaver Valley Farmland, protected it with a conservation easement, and advertised an RFP to sell the farm, simultaneously documenting the process to be utilized by other practitioners.

Since 2016, Jefferson LandWorks partners have protected and transferred a total of 363 farmland acres in four transactions.



North Beaver Valley Farmland Selection Committee Members Onsite. Photo by Kellie Henwood.

The findings and guidelines that follow are based on the experiments and learning gained in the four projects conducted between 2016-2025; they are a product of what we found to work well, as well as our mistakes. They are shared here in the hope they may be helpful to others embarking on this path.

Collaboration is Key to Success

Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders in Equitable Land Access Efforts

Organizations aiming to advance equitable land access must begin by identifying who will be directly involved in or impacted by such efforts. Successful land access and transfer initiatives rely on a diverse group of stakeholders, each playing a vital role in shaping and sustaining long-term outcomes. These stakeholders can make the most impact when they work together as a collaborative team over many years, responding to emerging challenges that farmers and communities face together in their region. The following categories outline key stakeholders to consider convening into a local or regional collaborative to implement local strategies:

Types of Stakeholders to Consider

Landowners and Farmers: This group includes individuals or families who currently own or operate farmland. It encompasses new and beginning farmers, farmworkers, established producers, and retiring farmers or landowners. Understanding their long-term goals and barriers to access is essential for designing relevant interventions and support.

Agricultural Resource Organizations: These include land trusts, conservation districts, land grant universities, Cooperative Extension offices, and federal agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). As resource providers, they offer technical assistance, planning support, and policy guidance, and are often well-positioned to facilitate connections across sectors.

Local and Regional Markets: This may include farmers markets, local grocery stores, food co-ops, and food hubs that connect producers to consumers and wholesale buyers. Identifying viable marketplace opportunities is critical for supporting the economic sustainability of farming operations, and engaging these entities as stakeholders provides insight into current market demands.

Business Advisors and Lenders: Stakeholders in this category bring expertise in agricultural business planning, financial literacy, and access to capital. They play a key role in assessing and strengthening farm viability through tools such as business plans, financial projections, and loan applications.

Community Members and Advocacy Groups: Equitable land access efforts must include historically marginalized and underserved communities. These groups bring lived experience, insights into systemic barriers, and innovative approaches that ensure land access models are relevant, inclusive, and just.

Building a Collaborative Framework

Equitable land access efforts are strengthened when nonprofits, public agencies, producers, and landowners convene around a shared vision: preserving working lands while fostering vibrant, inclusive rural economies. To support this work, collaboratives are encouraged to:

- **Establish Shared Guiding Principles.** Develop a clear set of principles that help align partners around common values and provide a foundation for equitable and transparent decision-making;
- **Promote Collaboration and Shared Goals.** Relationship-building is fundamental to cross-sector collaboration and creating space for mutual learning and trust helps to align priorities and ensure stakeholder buy-in; and
- **Implement Inclusive Engagement Strategies.** Organizations must be intentional in centering underrepresented voices and addressing systemic inequities in land access by adopting power-sharing practices such as practicing consensus, engaging in shared decision-making, consultation, responding to feedback, and ensuring that all stakeholders have a role in shaping outcomes.

By thoughtfully identifying stakeholders and cultivating inclusive, values-driven collaboration, organizations can design and implement land access initiatives that are responsive to local needs, resilient over time, and fair.

Stakeholder Spotlight: Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative as an Example

Partner organizations in Jefferson County, Washington have been engaged in proactive and innovative land access initiatives for many years. In 2006, a consortium of local organizations established the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative (LWC or LandWorks) in response to increasing concern that development pressures were rendering farmland more valuable for real estate investment than for the production of food and agricultural goods. LandWorks was not created solely to preserve farms and forestlands. Rather, its members recognized that the most effective way to maintain the rural character of the landscape and community is to ensure that land-based business activities are environmentally sustainable and remain profitable for landowners, thereby reducing the land's vulnerability to development, speculative land investment, or non-farming acquisition.

The Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative is driven by a shared mission to ensure the long-term sustainability of the county's working lands — its farms and timberlands. This mission is threefold: to keep these lands available, affordable, productive, and profitable; to provide farmers and foresters with access to business training, capital, and expertise; and to ensure that robust markets and consumer demand are in place to support their products. Each LandWorks partner brings specialized expertise to this collective effort, working closely with stakeholders to offer land acquisition and preservation support, financial guidance, marketing opportunities, educational programs, and resource management.

Partners

The following is a list of all organizations that have been involved in the LandWorks Collaborative at various points since 2006. Note the representation of the various stakeholders described above in “Types of Stakeholders to Consider” in this example of a collaborative.

Craft3:

Nonprofit Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI)

Lends capital and provides consultation services for farmers, foresters, and agricultural-related businesses.

Jefferson County Conservation District:

Local non-regulatory unit of government

Provides information and technical and financial assistance to help land users meet environmentally sustainable land-use goals.

Jefferson Farmers Market:

Nonprofit organization

Supports local farmers by providing vibrant marketplaces that foster community connections and ensure access to healthy food for all.

Jefferson Land Trust:

Nonprofit land trust

Helps the community conserve and enhance farms, fish and wildlife habitat, and forests using permanent land conservation tools such as conservation easements and land ownership. It also provides education, land restoration, land stewardship, and land access opportunities.

North Olympic Development Council:

Economic Development District

A federally-designated Economic Development District with member governments, community organizations, Tribes, and businesses. NODC works to empower the North Olympic Peninsula to pursue and invest in its own economic and environmental destiny.

Northwest Natural Resource Group:

Nonprofit forestry advisor

Connects landowners and communities with the knowledge, skills, and markets they need to steward their land through ecological forestry practices.

Port Townsend Food Co-op:

A national co-op grocer (NCG)

A local member-owned grocery cooperative since 1972 that provides a robust year round marketplace for local, organic produce and products.

Washington State University Jefferson County Extension:

Land-grant university

Provides outreach, education, research, access to food, farm, and forestry research, and business training and development. The Regional Small Farms Program administers Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative.

These partners meet monthly to work together to fulfill its mission of keeping working lands in Jefferson County productive and profitable. The Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative demonstrates that lasting impacts in working lands preservation and equitable land access are achieved through clear articulation of shared values, sustained inter-organizational collaboration, and a commitment to both environmental and economic sustainability. As such, it offers a compelling model for replication and adaptation in other regions seeking to build stakeholder coalitions around land conservation and access.

More information can be found on the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative website: www.jeffersonlandworks.org.

Buy-Protect-Sell

One of the strategies that Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative and other farmland support organizations across the country have identified as a solution to address both barriers to farmland access and to ensure the ongoing viability of farmland is called Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS). BPS is an emerging strategy that land trusts and other conservation entities are using to protect important farmland and facilitate its transfer to a new farm owner.

Using this strategy, conservation organizations can purchase at-risk farms, protect the property with a conservation easement, and then sell the land at a price that's reduced because of the conservation easement. This strategy gives conservation organizations the opportunity to thoughtfully assess and select a new landowner (or longterm lessee) that will promote the agricultural viability and productivity of the property and region.



Photo by Sarah Wright Photography.

Process for Buy-Protect-Sell

As stated above, this guidebook is primarily focused on the “sell” component of BPS projects. When developing a BPS project and preparing to transfer ownership of the property, Jefferson LandWorks (as a collaborative) and Jefferson Land Trust (as the landowner and recipient of grant funds) follow the steps outlined below for planning and implementing the project:

- Identify the farm and funding for the project;
- Assemble a small planning committee and identify guiding values for the farmer-selection process;
- Recruit a volunteer community selection committee that will review all materials submitted by farmers for consideration (offer stipends to volunteers when possible);
- Create and advertise a public Request for Proposals (RFP) that describes the opportunity for farmers to purchase the protected property;
- Invite short-form pre-applications from farmers for the selection committee to review;
- After paring down applicants, invite full proposals that include a business plan, financial feasibility, and land stewardship ethic documentation;
- Hold open houses at the farm for finalists;

- Review final proposals, conduct interviews, and select the farmer with the selection committee; and
- The landowner enters into a purchase and sale agreement (PSA) with the farmer to transfer the protected farm in 90-180 days.

Each of these steps and considerations are described in further detail below.

Identifying the Farm

When selecting a property to protect and sell, take into consideration the physical and nonphysical characteristics of the property that will determine whether the property is likely to be agriculturally productive and viable for farmers.

Characteristics to consider should include: water claims and certificates of water rights for irrigation and/or stock watering; soil types and field conditions; slope, topography and aspect of the land; existence and condition of agricultural infrastructure (fencing, barns and other outbuildings, well, irrigation pipelines and equipment); existence and condition of residential structures and associated infrastructure, such as power, potable water, and septic systems; prior land management (organic or conventional, tillage, livestock, etc.); neighboring land uses; recorded title conditions, such as liens or easements that may discourage mortgage lenders; environmentally sensitive areas, such as streams, wetlands, critical habitat for threatened, endangered or sensitive species, and rare or unique plant communities.

Key takeaway: We learned that a history of agricultural use on a property does not necessarily equate to a continuing good opportunity for new or existing farm enterprises to buy. Allowing time for your organization to fully vet the existing conditions of the property – ideally alongside experienced farmers – is key to attracting strong applicants and facilitating a successful transfer.

Funding

Finding funding for the initial purchase of the farm and subsequent conservation easement is a critical step. Funding can be found through loans, grants, and/or private philanthropy. In Washington State, two state agencies began working together in 2023 to allow farmland conservation entities to move quickly to purchase and protect at-risk farmland.

The Washington Housing Financing Commission created a low-interest loan program called Farmland Protection & Affordability Investment (FarmPAI) to assist eligible entities in protecting important at-risk farmland in order to keep it in production while lowering barriers to land access for beginning or historically underserved farmers and ranchers. Farmland conservation entities can apply for a loan, get approved quickly, and purchase an at-risk farm property much quicker than conventional conservation funding will allow.

FarmPAI is intended to be coupled with the Washington State Conservation Commission's Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA) program, which offers grant funding for purchase of agricultural conservation easements by conservation entities that qualify for the FarmPAI loan. In Jefferson Land Trust's experience, FarmPAI funds the "buy," FPLA funds the "protect," and the land trust conducts the "sell" portion of the Buy-Protect-Sell process.

Other state and federal agencies, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), are also rolling out buy-protect-sell funding programs across the country. Land trusts and other conservation entities are encouraged to look into these opportunities that are available in their states and regions.

Lastly, sharing compelling stories with your community and donors about BPS projects can help attract individual contributions. We believe the opportunity is especially appealing to potential donors when farmland protection is paired with permanent affordability provisions (such as the restrictive covenant example provided in **Appendix H**) which ensure that their philanthropic contribution benefits farmers for generations to come.

Planning Committee

The advantage of convening a planning committee in addition to the selection committee is to have paid staff and/or dedicated volunteers who can commit time to planning the selection and sale process for a specific property (in addition to representing the legal interests and obligations of the organization that has received funding for the “buy and protect” part of this process). The planning committee’s preparations reduce the time burden on the volunteer selection committee that is involved later in the process, and who are likely food-system professionals whose jobs will not pay them to participate on the committee.

While this guidebook is designed to serve as a resource for a planning committee, each property and organization is unique, and therefore the process for each project and the stakeholders it engages will be unique. If any of the organizations involved in planning the process have previously been involved in a farmland sale and selection process, the lessons they learned from that project should be intentionally drawn from to inform and improve subsequent processes.

The planning committee should identify target milestones and dates for the project, taking into consideration document drafting and review, times of year farmers are more likely to be available to submit an application, and enough time for documents like the RFP to make their way through various networks. Review the example timeline in **Appendix A** in the **Appendices: Example Resources** section.

Key takeaway: Keep the seasonality of farming in the forefront of your planning. If there are off-season times in your region, strategically plan for the farmer’s full proposals to be written during that time to decrease the burden on farmers to apply for an opportunity.

The planning committee should also identify the core values that will guide the selection process. These values should be identified ahead of recruiting the selection committee, and can be revisited throughout the process, especially when difficult decisions arise.

Key takeaway: The importance of identifying guiding values in advance cannot be overstated. In one example of a property’s selection process, the selection committee had a core disagreement about whether to abandon the selection process to prioritize one applicant based on their identity; this disagreement resulted in the resignation of one of the committee members. If the guiding values of the selection process had been identified ahead of time, this fracture could have been avoided.

An example of four values that Jefferson Land Trust has since identified for its BPS projects are: Accessibility, Transparency, Equity, and Promoting Agricultural Productivity.

Accessibility: The RFP and application process should be accessible to farmers from diverse backgrounds (education, nationality, ethnicity, language fluency, socioeconomic standing, and more). To achieve this, the RFP and pre-applications should reduce unnecessary jargon, acronyms, short timelines, and education and experience barriers. When possible and relevant, consider translating the publicized materials into languages other than English.

Transparency: Transparency demonstrates that your organization respects the time and interest farmers express in your opportunity. Be clear with applicants what the road to success is; if the committee is looking for specific information or qualities for a successful applicant, make that known. Be clear about your deadlines as well as your expected timelines for announcing decisions. Be transparent during the pre-application and application stage: share with applicants the ranking criteria that the selection committee will use. Provide the same information to all interested parties and applicants; if one applicant asks for more information than was originally provided, provide the new information to all applicants.

Equity: Provide applicants with resources and opportunities to connect with technical assistance providers (nonprofit business planners, agricultural extension offices, conservation districts, lenders who lend on farmland). Understand that not all applicants are starting from the same place and that additional time and guidance may be necessary for some farmers to complete the application process. These resources may provide the opportunity for an otherwise talented farmer to succeed in the application and purchase of the property.

Promoting Agricultural Productivity: the entire purpose of this program is to ensure that the protected farm property can serve its highest potential for agricultural productivity, contributing to the local and regional economy. Therefore, the ranking criteria and selection of a buyer or lessee should take into account the agricultural productivity that they are likely to accomplish if selected.

These example values are reflective of the goals of the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative and Jefferson Land Trust, specifically. Another organization or collaborative may have different values, but it is encouraged nonetheless to have them identified ahead of starting the selection process to guide a smooth and clear process.



Photo by Deja View Photography.



Photo courtesy of Grace Thompson.

Selection Committee

Once the planning committee has drafted the necessary guidelines and documents and determined approximate timelines, it can begin to recruit for the volunteer community selection committee. The selection committee can be between 7-11 people who have relevant and diverse knowledge and experience. Recommended individuals and groups from which to recruit a selection committee include:

- Experienced local or regional farmers;
- Small business owners or business advisors experienced at evaluating the financial feasibility of budgets and business projections (e.g., economic development councils, small business development centers, Farm Service Agency, lenders);
- Agricultural service providers (e.g., conservation district staff, Cooperative Extension agents, and other natural resource technical advisors);
- Food system workers (e.g., farm workers, grocers); and
- Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers. The USDA has previously described underserved farmers and ranchers as those who are: “beginning; socially disadvantaged; veteran; and/or limited resource”. However, selection committee members have also brought to light that there are many underserved groups related to farming, beyond the USDA’s definition; for example, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and those without birthright U.S. citizenship. These criteria should be defined relative to the community and region in which the property is situated.

A successful selection committee will include at least one member from each category above, ideally. Committee members preferably have diverse experiences in relation to each other. Including diverse experiences, professions, and perspectives helps to ensure that the process holds integrity for the farmers who are applying and dedicating their time to this opportunity. A template for recruiting selection committee members can be found in **Appendix B**.

The organization facilitating the project should be cognizant of the power dynamics and various levels of ability to participate on a volunteer committee. Membership on the selection committee is a volunteer role, and Jefferson Land Trust offers stipends in recognition of the fact that there can be financial barriers to volunteering, as well as emotional labor related to a committee’s work such as this. Optional reimbursement for transportation and dependent care is also offered to all volunteers of Jefferson Land Trust through its Equity and Access Fund. For more information see **Appendix C**.

Key takeaway: be realistic and clear when recruiting selection committee members about the workload and time commitment expected of volunteers. This helps to ensure commitment and follow-through for the process. Calculate ahead of time how many meetings will be necessary for the committee, and how many hours outside of meetings they will need to be available for, and the time of year.

Once the selection committee is formed, bring the committee together in person early in the process to build camaraderie and trust. Familiarize them with the project, the timeline, and the draft documents assembled by the planning committee. It’s essential to have the committee sign confidentiality agreements to protect any applicants’ sensitive information. Additionally, a conflict of interest protocol should be developed to ensure that no committee member is personally benefiting from the process and to avoid the appearance of insider dealings.



North Beaver Valley Farmland Planning and Selection Committee Members.

Provide the selection committee time to review and provide feedback on the draft documents and anticipated project timeline. The selection committee members are the people involved in the process who are the most likely to be farmers themselves, or familiar with farmers and their culture; therefore, run decisions by the committee to get a practicality check on the planning committee's assumptions.

After reviewing the RFP and other documents, the selection committee will likely meet to visit the property, attend public RFP information sessions, review and select pre-applications, review and select full proposals, conduct interviews, and select the final candidate. In our most recent project, being part of the selection committee required approximately 25-35 hours of time over seven months, both in and out of meetings.

Advertising the Request for Proposals (RFP)

When the community selection committee is considering the criteria for ranking applicants, common considerations that may arise include whether certain groups should be given preference, such as "local" farmers who have experience farming in the region. Some criteria may have special meaning for a particular community, and there's no "one-size-fits-all"

approach for farmland selection processes; however, it's important to recognize that the opportunity to purchase farmland below fair market value is a rare opportunity likely to be of interest to strong applicants across the country and from various backgrounds who are eager for long-term tenure.

Once the geographic range for advertising the RFP has been determined, the selection committee should put together an advertising strategy that includes email listservs, social media, paper fliers, and more. Groups to consider that likely have communication listservs include land-grant universities and extensions, incubator farms, cultural and ethnic farming cooperatives, local and regional farm network groups, farmers markets, granges, USDA offices, and nonprofit support organizations. Try to avoid unintentionally omitting groups from outreach by thinking strategically about how to widely get the word out. A diverse selection committee should be able to help brainstorm an extensive and comprehensive outreach list and approach.

When preparing the RFP, consider whether translating the RFP into languages other than English would support your search for farmers. If so, your organization or committee should also be prepared to translate any submitted pre-applications or full proposals into English for review, as well as prepare to arrange a translator for any interviews.

Prior to beginning to advertise the RFP, plan for public information sessions in-person and/or virtually. These information sessions give your organization or committee the opportunity to share the exciting opportunity with your community and farmers. A virtual information session will allow farmers who don't live locally to still hear directly from your organization about the RFP with the opportunity to ask questions. Record the information session for future reference by any interested applicants. Consider having drone and/or on-the-ground photography or videography to share during the information sessions so that interested applicants can get a good sense of the property without visiting it (which is unrealistic for potentially dozens of applicants). Subsequently, make sure to schedule a time and date for the final candidates to visit the property and advertise this date in the RFP so that candidates can plan well in advance for this visit if they are chosen to move into the second round.

Key takeaway: Do not rush the advertising and submission timeline for the pre-application. Plan for at least two months for the RFP to make its way through various agricultural outreach networks, for farmers to consider the opportunity, and to then submit a pre-application.

Pre-application and Selection of Pre-applications

When aiming to offer an accessible opportunity, the format of pre-applications should be accessible to all applicants regardless of their background, education, or technological literacy. Instead of requiring a formal one-page letter of intent, consider putting together a short-answer Google form, allowing video submissions from interested applicants responding to a set of questions, or allowing a simple emailed or mailed response to a short set of questions. This will allow a wider pool of applicants to demonstrate their interest without them needing specific professional skills.

For interested applicants who may be less computer savvy, consider providing instructions for mailing in a pre-application instead of emailing. During the next stage of the process (the full proposal), sufficient technical advisor resources should be provided to the applicants who can support them in drafting the application materials so that the selection committee can expect more extensive and formal proposals. **Appendix E** is an example questionnaire that Jefferson Land Trust has used as a pre-application for interested farmers; we have used Google Forms format to increase accessibility during the pre-application phase.

The selection committee should have a predetermined ranking criterion that will be used to select which pre-applications rank high enough to invite the submission of a full proposal. An example is provided in **Appendix F** in the **Appendices: Example Resources** section at the end of the document. We suggest inviting up to 10 candidates to submit full proposals. Do not fill a quota though. For example, if you only receive five promising pre-applications, do not invite more candidates to submit. Putting together a full proposal is extremely time-intensive for farmers and should only be encouraged if the selection committee sees the strong potential for the candidate to succeed.

However, if you know that farmland is in high demand in your area and you received fewer pre-applications than expected, consider whether your advertising timeline was too short, your outreach list was too limited, or perhaps the property does not meet the needs of farmers. Determine, in advance, what you will do if you do not receive strong proposals; will you open up the application process again, adjust the scope of farming activities you will allow, or adjust your ranking criteria? How will you communicate this to your applicants with full transparency?

Key takeaway: A lesson that we learned during one of our projects is that while it may seem more inclusive and accessible to invite all pre-applicants to submit a full proposal to provide them the chance to win this opportunity, this can be a waste of time and resources for applicants who would be unlikely to meet our ranking criteria and advance in consideration. We instead recommend that the pre-application phase be used to winnow down the candidate pool and to evaluate which applicants the selection committee is likely to rank as a potential top choice (based upon the applicants' experience, their understanding of the property's characteristics, and their proposed business plan summary). An important piece of feedback that we received from farmers is that if they do not know the number of people they are competing against for the opportunity, they may not feel it's worth putting the time in to prepare a full proposal.

Full Proposal Instructions

After the selection committee has chosen which farmers will move on to the next round, be sure to promptly notify them and provide a reminder of the date and time for the upcoming site visit. This will help ensure they can visit the property as early as possible in this next stage of the process.

Equally important is sending a thoughtful and appreciative email to those applicants who were not selected. Expressing gratitude for their interest and effort, while encouraging them to stay engaged with future opportunities, helps foster community goodwill. If your

organization anticipates offering additional farmland purchase or lease opportunities in the future, this outreach can keep strong candidates in the loop. Additionally, sharing local resources to help them strengthen their business plans may contribute to their success – and potentially make them a top candidate for your next project.

The instructions provided to selected applicants for submitting a full proposal should include as much detail as possible about the process, the property's characteristics, and the terms of the conservation easement. Providing thorough information upfront helps reduce confusion and limits the number of follow-up questions you may receive.

If new information becomes available after the instructions are sent out, be sure to share it with all candidates at the same time. This ensures that no applicant has access to more resources or information than others. To support this transparency, maintain a running FAQ that includes all asked-and-answered questions, and share it regularly with all applicants.

Proposal instructions should include a clear list of required materials, such as:

- A whole farm plan,
- A financial feasibility plan, including a three-year projection, start-up budget, and a financing and debt service plan,
- A structured set of questions with word limits, and
- A transparent explanation of how proposals will be evaluated by the selection committee, including a scoring matrix if applicable (**Appendix F**).

Keep questions simple and direct and avoid redundancy between narrative responses and supporting documents. Refer to **Appendix G** for an example of a complete proposal instruction packet. Given the level of detail requested in the example, it is recommended to allow farmers at least three months to prepare and submit their proposals.

Ranking and Selection

The ranking criteria should be reflective of the program's goals and identified values. **Appendix F** provides example ranking criteria that the LandWorks Collaborative partners and selection committee members created to assess pre-applications and full proposals. It is advised that the ranking criteria (or an overview) be shared in both the RFP and full proposal instructions so that candidates understand in advance what is required for a competitive application.

Selection of top applicants can happen through quantitative averaging of scores from the committee members, followed by a qualitative discussion among the committee.

Interviews, References, and Final Selection

Interviews: Following the selection committee's discussion of the final candidates, the top-ranked farmers can be invited to participate in a final interview round. The committee should prepare a tailored set of questions for each candidate and share these questions in advance to allow adequate time for preparation. It's important to note that these interviews are not traditional job interviews. Since the committee will have already received comprehensive proposals from the candidates, the interviews should instead serve as an opportunity for the farmers to meet the committee members, ask clarifying questions, and engage in a two-way discussion to deepen mutual understanding.



Photo by Chrissie White.

References: After interviews and before making a final decision, the committee should contact the references of the top two or three candidates. Each reference should be asked the same set of questions to ensure consistency and fairness. These conversations can provide valuable insights into each candidate's farming approach, stewardship ethic, and personal and professional strengths and weaknesses.

Final selection: In our experience, a final decision cannot always be made based on scoring alone – especially when there are multiple highly qualified candidates. The goal of the selection committee should be to reach a consensus through open discussion. While unanimous agreement may not always be possible, the objective is to arrive at a decision that all members can support – or at least accept – as fair and well-reasoned.

Transfer and New Ownership

Based on Jefferson Land Trust's experience, it typically takes 60 to 180 days for the selected farmer to secure the necessary financing for property acquisition. By the time a candidate is chosen, they should have already demonstrated financial feasibility and a strong likelihood of completing the purchase. However, selection committee members and resource partners should remain available to support the farmer during this critical phase.



Photo by Sarah Wright Photography.

Regardless of whether the selected farmer is new to the area or a long-time member of the local farming community – whether launching their first farm business or expanding an established one – they are likely to benefit from the expertise and resources offered by stakeholder partners. Be sure the farmer has opportunities to connect with these local partners and understands the services they provide to support long-term success in their new endeavor.

Permanent Affordability

It is widely recognized that placing a conservation easement on farmland can provide substantial financial benefits to the current landowner. These benefits may support capital improvement projects or help farmers save for retirement. However, a conservation easement does not guarantee that the land will remain affordable for future generations of farmers. In most cases, the easement simply reduces the property's value once – providing a one-time discounted price – without ensuring long-term affordability.

As rural areas become increasingly attractive to wealthier buyers seeking scenic, countryside living – particularly those no longer tied to urban jobs – the market value of farmland has

risen sharply, often outpacing what working farmers can afford. This trend threatens the continued agricultural use of conserved farmland.

Recognizing the need to keep farmland affordable for farmers — a profession that already faces slim margins — Jefferson Land Trust and other agricultural conservation organizations, including the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC), have studied permanent affordability mechanisms.

These tools aim to ensure that protected farmland remains accessible and productive for future generations. As of the publication of this guidebook, the WSCC has not yet released a formal publication detailing its legal analysis of various affordability tools for inclusion in conservation easements. Therefore, in the most recent BPS project conducted by Jefferson Land Trust, a separate restrictive covenant was created to address this issue. This covenant limits the annual appreciation value of the land, requires that the property be actively farmed, and provides Jefferson Land Trust the right of first refusal to purchase the farm in the future. All of this strives to preserve long-term affordability. The full text of this restrictive covenant is included in **Appendix H**.



Photo by John Gussman, courtesy of the Jefferson County Conservation Funds program.



Photo by Rodney Just.

Conclusion

At its heart, this guidebook is about making farmland more than just a commodity — it's about honoring its role in sustaining communities, economies, ecosystems, and culture. Across each project that Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative facilitated, a recurring theme emerged: farmland transfers can be powerful levers for change, but only when approached with transparency, intention, commitment to equity, and wraparound support for both the landowner and incoming farmers.

We see this work as one response to the complex forces shaping our food and land systems today: speculative markets, generational turnover, and structural barriers to land ownership. Within those realities, we're striving to make equity a tangible action — by ensuring that protected farmland remains not just conserved, but accessible, affordable, and productive for generations to come. Additionally, we acknowledge that this is just one of many complementary approaches needed to preserve farmland and support farmers.

By creating space for diverse voices in decision-making, supporting strong business planning, and embedding permanent affordability into land transactions, we believe these

methods help move the dial toward agricultural viability – not just for a season, but for the long haul.

We hope this guidebook supports organizations in replicating and evolving these practices, whether the land is owned by a land trust or another conservation entity, and whether the focus is farmland or – potentially – other working lands. In fact, we can already envision this framework being adapted to forestland, where equitable access, stewardship, and affordability are equally urgent concerns.

While the path forward will require creativity, commitment, and strong partnerships, we believe the practices described here are essential steps toward a future where working lands are not just protected – but are thriving, inclusive, productive, and permanently rooted in community.

Additional Resources

While by no means comprehensive, the following list of resources may be helpful.

Washington Farmland Trust Farm to Farmer Program

This Washington Farmland Trust program aims to help farmers find land, build capacity, access resources, and ultimately, thrive as business owners and stewards of the land.

Washington Housing Financing Commission FarmPAI Loan Program

The purpose of this revolving loan program is to assist eligible entities in protecting important at-risk farmland in order to keep it in production while lowering barriers to land access for beginning or historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Washington Conservation Commission Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP)

The OFP works to address the loss of agricultural land in Washington state by providing data analysis and farmland protection measures.

Land for Good

Land For Good provide support and expert guidance to help farmers, landowners and communities navigate the complex challenges of land access, tenure, and transfer.

American Farmland Trust's Land Transfer Navigators Program

The goal of the Land Transfer Navigators partnership is to significantly increase the transfer of farm and ranch land to a new generation of producers. The program is catalyzing organizations from across the country to support farm and ranch transfers that benefit retiring and aspiring generations.

USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service Buy-Protect-Sell Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The USDA NRCS Buy-Protect-Sell ACEP is a voluntary program that helps keep land available for agricultural production and provides long-term protection of farming and grazing uses.

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Appendices: Example Resources

Appendix A: Project Timeline

This project timeline was created based on experience from several farm sale RFP processes. Expect and plan for sufficient time buffers in each stage of the process. The explanation for each of these project timeline sections are further described in the ***Process for Buy-Protect-Sell*** section of this guidebook.

Appendix B: Selection Committee Recruitment and Application

This is an example of a recruitment and application document for finding volunteer community selection committee members. It can easily be made into a Google form and shared widely across your community. We recommend that you provide as many details (time commitment, project background, purpose of committee) as possible when recruiting.

Appendix C: Volunteer Equity and Access Fund

This is a copy of the language of Jefferson Land Trust's fund for volunteers that provides stipends and reimbursements related to volunteer work. Consider offering something similar for your volunteer selection committee.

Appendix D: Request for Proposal Examples

This includes multiple examples of our widely advertised RFPs, including one translated into Japanese and Spanish.

Appendix E: Pre-Application Questionnaire

This is an example format and set of questions for interested farmers to use to submit pre-applications for the selection committee's consideration. This document was shared with farmers as a Google Form.

Appendix F: Ranking Criteria Documents

This is an example of the two ranking criteria we used to 1) assess pre-applications, which is expected to be more general and less detailed than the eventual full proposal and 2) assess the full proposals, which should include significantly more detail than the pre-applications.

Appendix G: Full Proposal Instruction Example

This is an example of the instructions we provided to final candidates for the North Beaver Valley Farmland project. This can be used and modified for other projects.

Appendix H: Restrictive Covenant

This is the restrictive covenant we used to limit the annual appreciation value of the North Beaver Valley Farmland property and its infrastructure. It requires that the property be actively farmed and gives Jefferson Land Trust the right of first refusal so that we can choose to be part of selecting the next farmer-buyer in the future. This restrictive covenant was drafted by Jefferson Land Trust with the help of a regional attorney and is based on Groundwork Solutions Network's 2021 *Declaration of Affordability Covenants with Use, Refinance, and Resale Restrictions and Purchase Option*.



Photo by Sarah Wright Photography.



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