

By Steve Werblow

MAKING THE CONNECTION

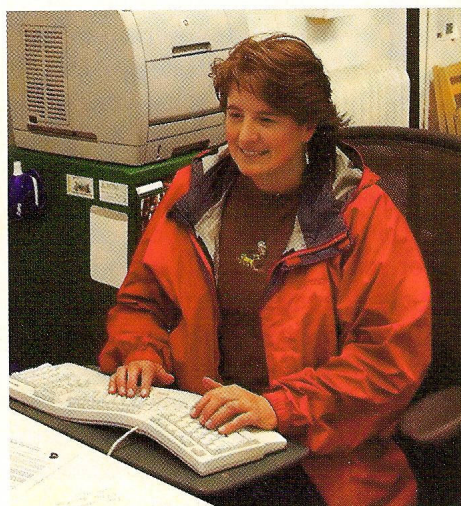
FarmLink programs help young buyers get into farming—and help sellers pass on their legacy

Farming has been in David Silveira's family for 400 years. But his father, a hired man at a California dairy, had no land or equipment to leave him. With an agriculture degree from the renowned California Polytechnic State Institute, Silveira took a management job with a vegetable operation, but he yearned for a farm of his own.

In February 2005, Silveira got his chance—a lease on 62 acres of fallowed farmland near Merced, Calif., owned by a retired farm couple who had been looking for an organic farmer who would care for their land.

In touch. Silveira and his landlords met through California FarmLink, one of more than a dozen programs in the U.S. that connect beginning farmers with landowners who can

►**Right:** David Silveira, of Merced, Calif., realized his dream of farming with the help of California FarmLink. ►**Below:** Mary Embleton, executive director of Cascade Harvest Coalition, runs the Washington FarmLink. New farmers can make great use of underutilized farmland, she says.





►**Top:** Bill Knutsen spent 8 years wrestling rent checks from cash-strapped cattlemen before linking with an aspiring vegetable grower, who's built a bustling operation on Knutsen's 78-acre farm. ►**Above:** Where replacement heifers once grazed, lettuce—and a young farmer—thrive.

help get them started in agriculture. (The nationwide list of groups is available online at www.farmtransition.org.)

The two parties negotiated a lease, consulting sample language provided by FarmLink. Silveira's operation is growing steadily from his first 2-acre plot. He is now hoping to secure a production loan through California FarmLink's new revolving loan fund, which four investors seeded with \$1 million in capital to help build beginning farms into strong businesses.

Access to capital is a major focus of California FarmLink. The group's Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), where each \$100 monthly deposit is matched with \$300 from allied banks, inspired a federal IDA proposal.

Good advice. In addition to the funds and the contacts, most FarmLink groups help farmers build the agricultural and business skills they'll need to manage their operations.

Bill Knutsen met young farmer Andrew Stout through Washington's FarmLink program in 2000. Knutsen was looking for a reliable, profitable tenant for a 78-acre farm he'd used to raise replacement heifers for his dairy.

Knutsen and Stout worked out a lease that started low, which allowed Stout to concentrate his efforts on a portion of the acreage and start building his business. Meanwhile, Cascade Harvest Coalition, which administers FarmLink in Washington, helped Stout with agronomy and marketing.

"By helping him develop his markets, that gave him cash flow to keep moving on," says Knutsen. Rents rose as Stout's business took off. Today, he sells premium organic vegetables to customers from Seattle to Alaska, farms all of Knutsen's 78 acres, and has spread to adjacent fields.

"It's been good for both of us," reflects Knutsen. "He's paid his rent all along, and he's got a going business. And when I'm ready to sell the farm, he'll be ready to buy it."

Setting the stage for a win-win deal is a vital part of FarmLink work. Conservation easements can reduce land values enough to put them within reach of beginning farmers while compensating landowners for development value. Selling buildings and equipment separately can also help put prices within reach of beginning farmers, adds Mary Embleton, director of the Cascade Harvest Coalition.

That's why FarmLink programs spend time coaching landowners on good transition strategies, too. "If you know what your goals are," says California FarmLink director Steve Schwartz, "you'll save a lot of money rather than trying to figure it out sitting in your lawyer's office."

For some, those goals include helping a young farmer gain a toehold.

"It's a philosophy that makes it work," says Mike Holton at the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Neb. "It has to be a retiring farmer who is interested in helping a farmer transition into the profession." ■