

Questions for Practical Farmers

What is the goal of the play / production?

The goal is to get people thinking and talking! And to publicized the critical role farmland owners have in determining Iowa's future. Practical Farmers also wanted to support the arts and longtime PFI member and writer/playwright Mary Swander and other Iowa artists.

Why is Practical Farmers tackling this issue now?

We are on the cusp of a monumental transfer in farmland ownership. Fifty-six percent of Iowa farmland is owned by people over the age of 65, according to Iowa State University's "Farmland Ownership and Tenure Report in Iowa 2012." Thirty percent of Iowa farmland is owned by those more than 75 years old.

What is the biggest threat from this transition?

Many farmers will lose their farmland during this transition. They will be unable to purchase the land when their current landlords die and heirs want to cash out.

The farmland transition is exacerbated by steep land prices, which make it very difficult for beginning farmers to get started. Iowa farmland values doubled from 2007-2012.

During the past 55 years, the number of Iowa farms has decreased from 206,000 to 89,000. We need to help the next generation of farmers grow our food, steward our land and keep our communities vibrant.

What are the opportunities during the time of transition?

If you own farmland: Now is a good time to think through what you value most. What are your hopes and dreams for its future? Do your heirs know your 50-year goals for that farmland? Do you want your farming children to continue the current farm operation? Do you want the farm kept together?

Questions for Mary Swander

What were the common themes you came across during your interviews?

Families struggling to find some peace within the conflict over the transfer of land from one generation to the next. Some families have given thoughtful attention to the issue; others have tried to push it from their minds. Some thought they had found a solution, and it didn't work out the way they had hoped. Other families had a member who helped all arrive at a compromise. No matter what happens, it is a difficult transition because one must face one's own mortality.

What was the biggest surprise?

The inherent conflict and tension that lies within the issue. When I began my research into the issue, I wondered where I would find the conflict for the show. The conflict was evident everywhere I turned.

You have a land-transfer story from your own family. Care to share it?

Many years ago, my two brothers and I ended up inheriting the family farm. My brothers wanted to cash out and take the money. I did not. Sadly, the farm was sold to a corporation without a trace of its homesteading past preserved.