

Farming for the Future



Saugeen River CSA January 2017 Newsletter

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Important notices!!!

Make sure to sign up for a share for this coming season... a first payment of at least \$100 reserves your spot!

This is the 20th year of the Saugeen River CSA. Yes, Canada is turning 150 and Owen Sound 160... but we are turning 20! We are planning a summer celebration, and if anyone wants to help with that... let us know!

Also, I would like to start the process of releasing our farm from the realm of private ownership and developing something of a land trust. This has been on the back burner in my thinking for the last 20 years, but needs to come up more in the front. If anyone is interested in exploring this possibility for the land with us, please let us know. Read on for details...

So this past year had many challenges for many people on many different levels. I'm usually one to remain optimistic. In the long term I am still optimistic about the Earth and humanity, but for the immediate future we have a great deal of work cut out for us to keep in a positive direction!

This past season was challenging for the CSA. The drought was stressful, and although I feel we weathered it well, some crops suffered. I also developed pneumonia twice. This points to the stress of managing the farm on my own. The Saugeen River CSA started as a partnership, and was managed that way for the first 10 years, but I have managed it solo since 2006. There are many challenges to changing that.

Challenge #1) Local by-laws do not allow two dwellings on one property. This is a cultural decision that assumes a single family can run a farm, or just hire outside labour. I can

understand this to some extent, however a diversified farming operation takes a group of people to run sustainably, and all living under one roof has other sustainable challenges.

Challenge #2) this is an 80 acre farm, which is very small by modern farming standards. Basically the only way for a farm this size to be anywhere near economically viable in this day and age is with more valuable crops (such as vegetables... although there are potentially other things). These higher valued crops also require more hands on activity... so this farm could not make it as a grain farm, or animal farm, where most of the labour is done with only one or two people and machines.

Challenge #3) the economic viability is tight. So even if there was another individual or family who wanted to join the farm and we figured out the living situation (challenge #1), there would have to be a restructuring of the farm activity to make it financially viable to provide a living to others (this is possible, so I would call it the lesser challenge). The current farming operation barely covers my half of the basic expenses (my wife is not involved in the farm business and works off farm to cover her half). The only way I am staying treading water is by teaching in the winter months, when the farm is only a half time activity. During the spring, summer and fall managing it on my own is like two full time activities.

Challenge #4) many people who are interested in beginning a career in sustainable agriculture don't have access to the money to get into it. One of the biggest hurdles I see with apprentices who want to start farming is the very high start up costs. There are sometimes creative ways folks have found around this, but most people just don't end up farming for this very unfortunate reason.

Challenge #5) probably the biggest challenge to finding others to join this farm is that people who want to start out often want to create something new, something that is truly theirs. They don't want to join something that is already in full motion and with a certain trajectory. I sympathize greatly with this, and understand it. But if some of the other challenges were removed or lessened, this one might be easier to overcome.

The pneumonia that I had is a reminder that something is going to have to change sooner than later. As it is now, the farm requires fairly hard physical labour. I would say that within the next 5 years I will not be able to continue farming the way I have. Either the activities of the farm will have to change drastically, or why not just sell the farm when I'm ready?

Just up the highway from us, there is a farm that has been going through a major transformation. I don't know the details of what is going on there and there can be many reasons to do different things on a farm, but it appears to be a symptom of modern agriculture. The house was torn down in the fall. The tree lines have been gradually removed. A hill is being flattened by very heavy equipment. The barn has been stripped of lumber and burnt. Only the silo remains. Now there could be many justifications for doing this. But the trend these days is for small farms to be owned by people who do not farm but rent the land out to "Croppers." A cropper is someone who may or may not own their own farm land, but primarily rents as much acreage as possible since they have invested in very large equipment. They watch the global crop markets and in any given season grow what is likely to get the best price for the input costs of

production (seed, fertilizer, pesticide, and fuel costs). This is almost exclusively one of the three big crops of corn, soy and canola.

So what I can imagine, if we simply sell the farm, something like this could very easily happen. The soil here is the best soil type for our area, so it would most likely try to be cropped. My imagination of bulldozers coming along and ripping out the hedgerows, the home of so many animals, and refuge for many others, seems all too possible. The easing of the wind that the trees provide could so easily be lost. Not to mention all the work that has gone into re-enlivening the soil after the neglect that this land had seen before we bought it. So we could try to hold out for a sustainable farmer to come along and want to buy it. This could take many years, and with the realities of challenge #4 above, I'm not sure we should hold our breath.

I learned about land trusts when I first started apprenticing to become a farmer over 25 years ago. This isn't an easy fix, but it offers many positive possibilities if it is structured in a careful and fair manner. A land trust is a non-profit organization that basically takes on the ownership of a property and preserves certain aspects laid out in its mandate. There are successful and unsuccessful versions of land trusts, so it is crucial to think through how it will be managed. What this can potentially do is preserve a piece of land for sustainable agriculture beyond the life of an individual farmer. It can also allow farmland to be available to those who are capable farmers, but not able to afford to purchase land themselves.

I'm looking for CSA members and friends who might be interested in exploring how to secure farmland for a sustainable future. Please contact me, I cannot do this on my own.

Here's to looking for the silver lining! Cory

