Farmland Access in the Hudson Valley

An Analysis of the
Farmer-Landowner Match Program
About the Columbia Land Conservancy

The Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) is a dynamic force in supporting and sustaining a strong and vibrant Columbia County, where agriculture plays a central role in the economy, where development respects historic traditions and natural resources, and where there are accessible open spaces and abundant, healthy natural lands and wildlife habitats.

For more than thirty years, CLC has collaborated with private landowners, businesses, government agencies, community groups, and partner organizations to preserve the County’s vibrant rural character. It has conserved more than 30,000 acres of farmland, forests, and wildlife habitat to ensure clean air and water, healthy ecosystems, a strong agricultural sector, and a rich variety of outdoor recreational opportunities. CLC works with the community to cultivate connection to the land by providing outdoor and educational activities at our 10 Public Conservation Areas, to support agriculture by ensuring prime farmland continues to be available to the next generation of farmers, and to promote land protection and smart land use planning.

Acknowledgments
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Finding Farmland in the Hudson Valley

Farming is an unpredictable and risky business and way of life. Farmers across the nation face universal challenges such as extreme weather, crop damage, pest infestations and shifting agricultural markets that may be impacted by global commodity pricing. Often times regional challenges and dynamics present further barriers to success.

Foremost among these barriers for Hudson Valley farmers who seek to begin, relocate, or expand their farm operations is the competition for a secure land base. Farmers in our region, as in many areas across the country, operate within in a real estate market primarily driven by second homeowners able to pay far more for prime farmland than farmers can afford. Many of these new owners reside in urban areas, primarily New York City and associated boroughs and suburbs, and often are unfamiliar with the local agricultural community, economic realities, and the need that farmers have for long-term land security.

The challenges associated with establishing and maintaining stable and successful farm businesses in the region are significant. Farming in the Hudson Valley has undergone a notable change over the last half-century, as the number of large dairies has declined and a significant amount of farmland has started to transition into the hands of non-farming landowners. In recent years the region has seen a resurgence in the number of people who want to farm, many of whom aspire to establish smaller, diversified operations such as vegetable farms and other operations offering value-added products such as cheese, jam, and yogurt. However, these aspiring farmers face significant challenges when they attempt to access the land from which to base their farm operations, particularly as land prices continue to rise.

In response to the changing dynamics of farmland ownership and usage, and the potential impact these changes can have on maintaining the rural character that defines our communities, in early 2009 the Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) developed a suite of programs designed to assist farmers with their search for suitable and stable farm arrangements and to help new owners of farmland better understand the role they can play in sustaining the region’s agricultural community. Several years later, CLC expanded this program by partnering with the Dutchess Land Conservancy (DLC) to broaden our services and formally extend the program into Dutchess County, and included farmland access assistance for those wishing to buy or sell farm properties. Since its inception nearly ten years ago, the Farmer-Landowner Match Program (Match Program) has assisted more than 400 farmers and landowners and facilitated 71 land matches. As we neared the end of our first decade of operation, an in-depth analysis of our services was conducted to help us plan for the next decade and to continue to help strengthen and stabilize our agricultural community.
Purpose of this Report
Our study utilized surveys and interviews with program participants to create a picture of where our services have been useful and successful, and where we could improve. We also reviewed and analyzed challenges and successes of similar land link programs on a national level in an effort to better understand commonalities as well as regional differences. We hope that the results of our analysis will not only result in a more effective and efficient program internally, but that others seeking to begin or expand similar programs might learn from our experiences, our challenges, and our successes.

Summary of Results
Participants were highly satisfied with the program generally, and most participants were very aware of the pressures associated with farmland affordability. Nearly half of the farmers surveyed considered farmland leasing to be a step towards eventual land ownership. However, few were registered in our more recently created farm buying program. Many cited lack of affordable listings as a barrier and many were not taking advantage of the full suite of services available to them, including staff assistance and other resources.

The success rate of our facilitated matches (41 of a total of 71 matches are still on-going) is high. However, there is still room for improvement. We believe we could improve the overall longevity and strength of the arrangements that we facilitate by spending more time with the parties to help them better think through the process, their goals, and their needs. Several of our recommendations would enable us to more deeply engage program participants in this way to improve the overall effectiveness of the program.

The analysis of national land link programs around the country revealed that many operated with limited budgets and part time staff devoted to program administration. All reported difficulty in accurately tracking the number, acreage, and duration of the matches generated by their programs. There was a common need for more resources devoted to training staff in financial guidance and business planning, as well as staff resources to devote to individual farmer assistance. Several programs had far more farmers seeking land than landowner participants and reported challenges in engaging retiring farmers in listing their land.
Summary of Recommendations
Recommendations regarding our Match Program include several ways to deepen this program’s impacts.

A primary recommendation is to reorganize all of our broad farmland protection, affordability, and leasing assistance programs under a common umbrella to help make them more accessible. Our analysis also revealed a need to establish a multi-track service system to identify program participants by their unique agricultural experience from the outset and identify their specific land use/farm operation goals. This tiered approach will enable us to offer more targeted and relevant assistance as individual participant experiences and goals change over time, which we hope will result in more secure long-term land tenure for farmers.

Our study clearly highlighted a need for a more well-designed and accessible web presence, including a more interactive website, an enhanced database, and an updated online resource library. More affordable listings as well as financial guidance will improve the farm buyer program.

An annual re-subscription feature will ensure listings remain active. Requiring Match Program participants to complete a short re-subscription form each year will allow program administrators to monitor the farmer’s or landowner’s match status and allow CLC staff to better assist participants.

Meanwhile, continuing to strengthen CLC’s collaborations with regional partners, such as DLC and the HVFN, will help to ensure that the Match Program is reaching as many participants as possible and that these participants have access to all of the resources made available by these collaborations. Increasing our outreach efforts to engage participants will help to ensure that participants use these resources to the fullest. A portion of this work will include using participants’ feedback to improve the annual Down to Earth Workshop Series. Similarly, working with volunteer farmers to establish a more effective process for assisting landowners will result in more timely responses to landowner requests, and make better use of this resource.

In order to guarantee the long-term benefits of this program, we recommend increasing staff capacity when possible and standardizing the tracking process. Increased staff capacity will result in more individual assistance to participants and professional development for program administrators, while standardizing how relevant information is recorded will help staff transitions over time.

At the national level, we recommend organizations that are considering starting a Match Program or other similar service spend the time up-front to clearly understand their own unique regional dynamics and economics, so that they can design the most effective programs to meet local need. Flexibility to change and adaptation over time, adequate resources to manage services, and individual autonomy balanced with regional collaboration are all keys to establishing successful farmland access programs.

We hope that our study provides a useful framework for others, and that the lessons that we have learned over the last decade of operation can help increase the overall effectiveness of farmland access programs nationwide.
FARMLAND ACCESS CHALLENGES: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Farmers access farmland through ownership and farmland leases, and combinations of the two such as lease to buy arrangements. Each type of land tenure arrangement carries benefits and drawbacks. Owning farmland provides long-term land security so that a farm business can invest in capital improvements while building equity in the land. However, the expenses associated with purchase and ownership can be cost prohibitive, particularly for new farmers. Leasing can be beneficial as it allows farmers to establish or expand their operations without committing to a down payment and mortgage. However, few leases provide sufficiently reliable long-term land security for a farmer. While the lack of security may be an acceptable risk for an operation that requires large amounts of rental land with relatively little investment, a land tenure arrangement that falls apart can be devastating for an operation such as a vegetable farm that is entirely reliant upon a single lease arrangement.

In their 2017 study *Building a Future with Farmers* the National Young Farmers Coalition found that lack of access to farmland was the biggest challenge faced by new and beginning farmers across the nation. The National Young Farmer’s Coalition Study further found that farmers under the age of 30 were significantly more likely to rent land (70%) than those over 30 years of age (37%).

How much a full-time farmer can afford to pay for land is determined in large part by the type of products he or she sells and the prices these products command in the market. Non-farmer buyers are not typically under such constraints and in the Hudson Valley region, can often pay far more than farmers for prime farmland to utilize as residential lots.

Compounding the challenges of land access across the country is an aging population of farm owners without younger farmers financially positioned to acquire these lands and farm businesses. According to a 2016 report from the American Farmland Trust, *Keeping Farmers on the Land*, nearly one-third of New York State’s Farmers are over 65 years old. Of these more than thirteen-hundred senior farmers, whose operations cover over 2 million acres of available farmland, only 8% are currently working with a farmer under 45 years of age, signaling a lack of succession planning.¹

Over the next few decades, much of this land will change hands. Successfully transitioning this land into the hands of the next generation of farmers, and keeping the land in production, will require employing a wide range of tools and techniques to help farmers establish secure long-term tenure arrangements on available farmland.

¹ American Farmland Trust, Gaining Insights, Gaining Access, 2016, https://www.farmland.org/initiatives/gaining-insights-gaining-access
Land link programs across the country, including the Match Program analyzed in this report, have begun to address these challenges by helping farmers seeking land locate and identify owners of available farmland. Each land link program must approach land access in ways that address local challenges based upon its area of service, demographics, cultural dynamics, market forces and other unique and defining features of agricultural communities. Challenges may vary widely across the nation. For example, a vegetable farmer just outside of a major city on the east coast may have a difficult time outbidding a real estate developer or second home buyer for flat, open land. However, growing vegetables in California’s Central Valley may be profitable enough to enable farmers to compete with non-agricultural competitors in the real estate market, while a vegetable grower in the Midwest may have to compete against large scale corn operations that supply the ethanol industry and can pay higher rental prices as well as sale prices.

As hurdles to farmland access vary by region so, too, must the programs designed to assist local farmers with the challenges they face.
THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF FARMING IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

Columbia and Dutchess Counties are situated in New York State’s Hudson Valley along the east bank of the Hudson River, approximately two hours north of New York City and one hour south of Albany’s Capital District. This predominately rural region has a long agricultural history. Its location, with favorable weather conditions, prime agricultural soils, and growing urban populations nearby, has sustained a succession of agricultural markets since European settlement.

In the early 1800s, the region saw a transition from wheat to a greater emphasis on sheep, hay and rye production followed by apples and dairy through the 20th century. Currently dairy is the largest agricultural sector in New York, followed by apples, grapes, onions, sweet corn, tomatoes, maple syrup, and a wide variety of other fruits and vegetables.

While proximity to urban centers continues to create a demand for food that supports regional food producers, it also gives rise to residential and commercial pressure on farmland availability. As cities have grown beyond their original footprints and pushed development further into the Hudson Valley, Columbia and Dutchess Counties have increasingly been subject to the peri-urban influences of real estate development and land fragmentation.

Adapting to the Changing Landscape

Of the dairy farms that have survived fluctuating milk prices and periods of economic crisis, some have responded by re-branding their products in order to fetch a higher premium at market. Others have sought to scale up production in order to maintain profit and acquired additional land through purchases and lease arrangements.

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In addition to dairy operations, the region continues to support crops including vegetables and fruit, small livestock, beef, grain, and value-added operations. Operations catering to direct sales through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) where members purchase shares of a harvest, and localized distribution through locally-scaled distribution networks (such as Hudson Valley Harvest, Field Goods, and CSAs that aggregate farm products from multiple operations) have begun to flourish.

Craft alcohol industries are also growing in popularity in the Hudson Valley Region as farms look to increase their profitability per acre of farmland. State policies such as the New York State Farm Brewery Law incentivize craft beer operations to source New York State-grown ingredients. Between 2014 and 2016 the acreage of New York State hops doubled while the acreage of barley nearly quadrupled.

Beginning farmers are moving to the area to establish new farms, while existing farmers are looking to remain profitable. A broad range of government, non-profit, and philanthropic service providers have formed a strong agricultural support network. These efforts are part of a regional transition where farmers are finding new ways to reach their customers and capitalize on the local food movement.

Relying heavily on organic or other similar practices, these newer operations can at times be in conflict with local dairy and commodity producers for land. Many landowners new to the region are seeking to transition their land away from the production of crops such as corn and other commodities that are important to the dairy industry. The Match Program assists all types of farmers and landowners and seeks to help all parties find suitable matches for their own properties, operations, goals and needs.

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FARMLAND ACCESS PROGRAMS  
IN COLUMBIA AND DUTCHESS COUNTIES

History of Columbia and Dutchess Land Conservancies
CLC was formed in 1986 as a land conservancy focused on conserving Columbia County’s rural character and began protecting land, including farmland, from development using a private land protection tool known as a conservation easement. To date, CLC holds conservation easements on more than 27,000 acres of land in Columbia County. Nearly half of these protected lands include working farmland, totaling 11,300 acres. In recent years, CLC has begun to implement additional affordability provisions into its conservation easements to further ensure that protected farmland remains available and affordable for farmers.

DLC was formed in 1985 as a land conservancy to protect, among other characteristics, Dutchess County’s agricultural heritage, scenic resources, and diverse natural resources. DLC has protected more than 39,000 acres of important farmland, water resources, wildlife habitat, and scenic views since its inception.

Creation of Farmer-Landowner Match Program
In early 2009, CLC initiated the Match Program with the goal of helping to ensure the County’s important farmland remained in production. CLC recognizes that while conservation easements are critical farmland protection tools, the costs associated with creating and stewarding them are high and they are not ideal for all farmland scenarios. CLC’s confidence in the Match Program rests in the belief that as lands remain in production and continue to support a viable farm business they are protected as a practical matter from non-agricultural development. Therefore, in keeping with its organizational mission, the creation of the Match Program was meant to supplement other CLC farmland protection activities including its work with conservation easements and affordability tools and has since become a critical tool for doing so.

Since its inception, the program has assisted more than 400 farmers and landowners and facilitated 71 land matches over its first nine years. From the outset the program has attracted nearly an even number of farmers and landowners, as illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Current Match Program participants](image)
With farm operations ranging from hay production and row crops to vegetable CSAs and fruit orchards as shown in Figure 2, the Match Program has helped keep approximately 3,600 acres of Hudson Valley farmland in production, supporting our local agricultural system in a variety ways.

As the Match Program grew and began to show clear successes, CLC partnered with DLC in 2012 to expand the services into neighboring Dutchess County. In 2014, CLC assisted the American Farmland Trust and other service providers with the design and creation of the Hudson Valley Farmlink Network (HVFN), a 15-member group servicing 13 counties in the Hudson Valley.

As the Match Program expanded, CLC launched the Conserve A Local Farm Project in 2013. This program was designed to be an online directory of local farmland for sale at risk of conversion to non-agricultural uses. The Conserve a Local Farm program has helped one family purchase farmland and assisted dozens of land seekers in their searches.

In addition to offering “Farmers Seeking Land” and “Land for Lease” listings on its website, the Match Program was also designed to provide guidance to its participants. Staff are available for phone and in-person consultations, and offer resources such as lease templates, farm funding guidance, and service provider referrals. Annual “Down-to-Earth” workshops allow both farmers and landowners the opportunity to learn from each other and from field experts regarding a variety of topics such as business planning, drafting successful farm leases, agricultural mediation, farmland assessment and analysis, and the impacts of farming on land and water quality.

The demand for the Match Program services has grown steadily over recent years, averaging 80 new participants every year since we began recording enrollment data in 2012. Since its creation, CLC staff have at times struggled to keep pace with the increasing growth and popularity of the program. From 2009 until 2015, the program was managed by a single staff person who was only able to commit a portion of her time to the program given CLC’s other farmland conservation programs and efforts. In late 2015 CLC was able to secure funding to hire a second staff person to assist with management of the Match Program.
How the Farmer-Landowner Match Program Works
At the time of the study, the Match Program was operated as follows. Participants completed an online form or contacted the program administrator at CLC to join, and all services were offered free of change. As part of the application process, farmers were asked to briefly describe their farming experience, business plans, land requirements, and geographic preferences. Landowners were asked to describe their farming experience, types of farm operation they were open to, and to provide a description of their property.

The program administrator entered the information into a database and generated a user profile posted on the Match Program website. Participants were then asked to review the information and notified that an introductory phone call would be scheduled. This call was an opportunity for the CLC staff member to introduce the program, revise any information, and to learn more about each individual’s goals for joining the program. CLC also created a set of land maps for available properties including aerial imagery with hydrography, topography, and soil composition. Following the initial phone call, a user’s profile was activated, listed online by an anonymous identification number, and the administrator would initiate the search process by suggesting potential contacts for the participant to contact. Once the administrator activated the accounts, the participants could request contact information for listings (including maps, if available). CLC staff were available to provide feedback through the lease negotiation phase, but only when directly requested by a participant.

Email updates were sent to all participants quarterly, along with announcements of upcoming events. Feedback and reporting on farm leases from participants was encouraged, but voluntary. Each fall, participants were invited to the Down to Earth Workshop Series which consisted of three or four individual workshops relevant to farmland access. These workshops were offered at no cost and were open to the public. They typically featured presentations and panel discussions. Past topics include an introduction to farmland leasing, a tour of a leased farm, farm transfer and estate planning, a review of various farming practices, and other topics relevant to program participants.

Farmer Volunteers
The Match Program maintains a list of farmers who have volunteered to assist landowners with farmland assessments, and to answer other questions they might have about farming in general. The volunteer farmers include both retired farmers and active farmers who have experience with a wide diversity of operations. They have provided invaluable assistance - particularly for new farmland owners with little farm experience - by helping them better understand the potential of their land or lack thereof (for example, understanding the importance of soil types and water resources required by different types of operations).

Regional Network
On a regional scale, the Match Program is in an advantageous position to offer individual assistance to farmers and landowners in Columbia and Dutchess Counties. Working on this scale allows the program administrator to develop relationships with participants over time, while being a member of the American Farmland Trust’s Hudson Valley Farmlink Network lends capacity to our program that might otherwise be reserved for larger land link programs. In turn, we are able to share our experiences with other members of the Network so that all partners can learn from each other, support each other, and develop stronger regional initiatives.
A STUDY OF COLUMBIA LAND CONSERVANCY AND DUTCHESS LAND CONSERVANCY PROGRAMS

Introduction to Study
The Match Program analysis was begun in 2016 in an effort to better understand where the Program was most successful, and how it could be improved. We conducted the study by analyzing results of several different surveys, as well as in-person phone calls and interviews. As outlined below, our study was further enhanced by a review of national land link programs, to enable us to understand how our program functioned in a broader context, and to offer our results and findings in a way that would be useful and applicable to other similar service providers.

Background and Methodology
The Match Program Participant Survey was designed to solicit specific information about individual users’ experiences, gather a general understanding of how the program was being used, and understand how it could be improved as it enters its second decade of operation. In order to be applicable to both farmers and landowners as well as to accommodate the range of experience participants have had with the program, the survey included three distinct sections:

1. Background Information in order to collect basic data such as how long the participant had been enrolled with the Match Program, how the participant first heard about the program, and his or her experience with other land link programs.

2. Farmer/Landowner Questions to learn what participants identified as the most pressing land access issues, how they had used the Match Program, whether it helped them establish a farmland lease, and, if so, specifics about those leases.

3. Program Feedback to understand how each participant engaged with the program, accessed available technical assistance and staff guidance, overall satisfaction with the program, and suggestions for improvement.

A web link to the Match Program Participant Survey was sent electronically or by hard copy to the 329 participants in June of 2016. Participants had until November of 2016 to complete and return their surveys. The surveys were designed to be anonymous, although individuals who included profile numbers could be entered in a raffle. Contact information was requested if they were willing to speak with us on the phone or in person.

We received 65 completed surveys with a near-even split between farmers and landowners responding. Additionally, CLC staff interviewed eight farmers and six landowners at length either in person or over the phone to gather detailed information about their Match Program experience.
**How Participants Learned About the Farmer-Landowner Match Program**

Most of those who responded had recently joined the program (58% reported joining the Match Program within the previous two years). This may indicate that active participation was higher among those who recently joined. Figure 3 illustrates how participants reported first learning about the Match Program.

Seventy percent of respondents indicated that the Match Program was the only land link program they participated in. Those who indicated they participated in multiple land link programs have joined the Hudson Valley Farmland Finder, Catskill Farm Link, New York Farmlink, and New England Farmland Finder in addition to the Match Program.

**Why Participants Joined the Farmer-Landowner Match Program**

Most farmers joined the Match Program because they hoped to find leased land that they otherwise could not afford.

Figure 4 indicates the various reasons why farmers joined the Match Program (users could choose more than one reason), with the most common reason being land was too expensive to purchase.
Landowners joined the Match Program for a variety of reasons as well, as indicated in Figure 5. It was noteworthy that more landowners joined the program in order to keep their land in production than to receive a lower tax rate.

**Who Used the Farmer-Landowner Match Program**

More than half of the farmer respondents were beginning farmers (fewer than 10 years of experience), providing them with an opportunity to explore a career in agriculture without an insurmountable capital investment at the outset. Only 20% were raised on a farm, and 55% reported no formal agricultural education. Half had worked at farms as apprentices and/or farm managers.

The Match Program was also an important resource for existing farm owners, as 42% of the farmers who responded to this survey joined the Match Program in order to expand their farm.

In contrast to the large number of new and beginning farmers who have joined the Match Program, the majority of landowners reported owning their property for ten or more years before joining the program.

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**Figure 5: Why landowners joined the Match program**

**Figure 6: Farmer respondents by type**
Only twenty-eight percent of landowners who completed the survey responded that they owned their land between 2 and 9 years before joining the Match Program, with the remaining 9% having joined the program within a year of purchasing their land. Landowners in the Match Program had a wide range of acreages available to lease to farmers, as indicated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Acreage available to lease by landowners in the program
Successful Matches:
A Farmer’s Perspective:
Farmers who found successful matches through the Match Program ranged from beginning farmers to those with decades worth of experience. Nearly half of the analyzed matches were established within one year of a farmer signing up for the program, and all reported matches were made within the first three years of a farmer signing up for the program. Seventy percent signed a written lease with the landowner and more than three-quarters of these leases were still active. Figure 8 indicates the range of the size of properties successfully matched, with less than 20 acres being by far the most common.

Figure 9 reflects the prevalence of livestock operations as a significant presence in the Match Program’s successful arrangements, due in part to the fact that these operations require a significant amount of support land for grazing and growing winter feed. At the same time, our data pointed to an equally high prevalence of successful match arrangements with vegetable operations.

While each farm match was unique, in general farmers described cordial relationships with their landowners and were happy with their farm leases, and 85% considered their lease a success. Slightly more than half described their landowner taking an interest in the farm business although only a few reported collaborating with the landowner regarding their farm businesses. Seventy percent of these farmers reported communicating with the landowner one or more times per month. One farmer reported that, “long term investments to the land were paid for by the landowners (such as greenhouses, walk in cooler, etc) and will stay here even if we leave. We did the construction/provided the labor.” However, for the most part, the leases did not include the landowner making improvements to the land.
Farmers reported a wide range of rents for their leases (from no cash at all to $500 per year for one acre with a greenhouse). This was due in part to the fact that some arrangements provide landowners with a New York State agricultural tax assessment, which is arguably worth more than the going rate of farmland rentals, while others provided some share of the crops produced or labor to help maintain the property. Of those matches that did pay a fee, $80-$100 per acre per year was typical. Other arrangements varied:

“We provide a CSA share plus eggs, provide ag assessment, once grossing $30,000 we will pay 10% of our gross income.”—Match Program Farmer

**Successful Matches: A Landowner’s Perspective**

Landowners ranged from those who had just recently purchased their land to those who had owned their land for ten or more years. Properties were widely scattered, although most successful matches for which we had information occurred in Columbia County as indicated in Figure 10.

Feedback from landowners suggested that landowners engaged in lease arrangements were similarly satisfied with their arrangements. Eighty four percent of the landowners who had found a farmer through the Match Program considered their farm lease a success. Two-thirds signed written leases with the farmer(s). Sixty percent consulted the CLC resources webpage and found the information provided there useful. Only 30% consulted Match Program staff directly, yet of those who did reach out to CLC staff 80% found our services helpful. Thirty percent of landowners who leased farmland relied on legal assistance when setting up their arrangements.

**Summary of Successful Matches**

At the time of this publication, 40 of the 71 the Match Program -facilitated matches were still active and covered approximately 2,400 acres of farmland. Some of these matches ended not because the farmer or the landowner was unsatisfied with the arrangement, but because the farmer’s business goals changed.

Overall, participants reported being very satisfied with the Match Program. Individual user feedback did however suggest room for improvement. Survey respondents noted that their experience would have been improved with a more user-friendly website, with more guidance regarding signing farm leases, and more assistance with purchasing farmland and establishing secure, long-term land tenure.
Why Leases Fail
The overall success rate of the Match Program is high. However, we believe this rate could be improved. We did not undertake a statistical analysis of why matches failed given the complexity of the question, but instead conducted personal interviews with participants for whom leases have been terminated. The results of those interviews combined with anecdotal evidence that we have collected over the years is important in understanding how we might be able to improve our services.

Many of the failed leases were terminated within the first year or two. We have learned that often in these situations, the goals of the landowners and the goals of the farmers were divergent and/or incompatible, a problem that could have been avoided had the parties fully worked through their arrangement from the start.

“...we were naive and let the landowner call the shots. We ended up feeling as though we were unable to do our work because of unrealistic and unclear expectations on the part of the landowners.”—Match Program Farmer

Poor communication has been a clear explanation in many cases for why leases were terminated. Commonly, landowners who were unhappy with their leases told us that they felt as though their personal space was being encroached upon, that the farm operation was not as neat as they would like, or that the farmer was not meeting his or her end of the contract. Farmers who were unhappy with their leases have often described conflicts with landowners around their working space and access to the land, and lease conditions that did not accommodate their business needs.

Productive and on-going communication is perhaps the most critical aspect that should be encouraged and promoted, both before leases are entered into and throughout the process. In addition, ensuring that all parties have clear expectations of the goals of the arrangement and the expected outcomes is critical. In regions such as ours, where non-farming landowners and farmers have such a divergence of experiences and backgrounds, it is essential that the parties find ways to educate each other about their respective needs, and to constantly strive to understand each other’s perspectives.

“Be clear about what you are looking for...good business and agricultural knowledge, humility, transparency, and honesty are needed on both sides.”—Match Program Farmer

From Farmland Leasing to Buying a Farm
Farmers see their participation in the Match Program as a step towards purchasing farmland. Forty seven percent reported that leasing farmland was an important step toward land ownership and sixty three percent indicated that they hoped to purchase land within the next five years. The greatest factors affecting if and when farmers planned to purchase land included the price of land, how suitable the land was for their farm operation, and access to capital through business growth. Respondents were indifferent about whether the land they purchased was protected with a conservation easement. Only a quarter indicated that they hope to find business partners to invest in their operation.

The fact that so many Match Program participants expected to purchase land was significant because only 17% had enrolled in the farm buyer program. Half were not aware that the program existed, and among those who had signed up only one had seriously considered a listed property. The common reasons for not making better use of the program included not enough listings and the listings being too expensive.
**Participant Feedback**

As seen in Figure 12, participants were satisfied with the Match Program, the listings it provides, their interactions with CLC staff, and the website. Satisfaction rates fell below 50% when asked about the Down to Earth Workshop Series and resources.

CLC staff and the Match Program website both play an important role in connecting farmers and landowners. In over 80% of cases, staff were able to recommend potential matches. A majority of program participants (70%) made use of the website.

Meanwhile, Figures 13 and 14 indicate that the amount Match Program participants communicated among each other varies widely, and that few participants were making use of online resources such as guidance documents and sample leases.

**Figure 12: Program satisfaction**

**Figure 13: Staff interactions**

**Figure 14: Use of online resource library**
Farmer Volunteers
Although not specifically addressed in the survey, an assessment of the CLC/DLC farmer volunteer program is also relevant to the program’s functionality. Many, if not the majority of, landowners who joined the Match Program noted that if offered, they would appreciate a site visit from a volunteer farmer. Since the inception of the farmer volunteer program, staff have struggled with how to ensure farmer response to landowner request is timely and reliable. Landowners often expect a short response time from farmer volunteers. While farmer volunteers are extremely knowledgeable, it can often be very hard to coordinate with them for advice. In particular, we have struggled with landowner frustration at slow response time, and as a result in recent years have scaled back the volunteer assistance program. However, there remains high potential for enhancing and utilizing the assistance of volunteer farmers in the Match Program if new systems and approaches can be designed and implemented to improve reliability and responsiveness.
Incorporating a national land link analysis into our larger report provided context to our findings. This review also identified several techniques and lessons learned from others that could be used to strengthen our own land link program.

**Studying Farm Link Programs Across the Nation**

In addition to the work done by CLC, DLC, and the HVFN in the Hudson Valley, many other organizations, such as land trusts and state governments across the United States, have initiated similar land match programs. Such programs have increased in number from just a handful in the 1990s to more than two dozen today. Because specific hurdles to land access for farmers vary by region, each program is necessarily unique as approaches, organizational capacity, and goals also differ.

In order to understand how these programs vary by region, CLC identified 28 land match programs from 20 states across the country through internet searches and sent each an online survey via email. This survey collected information on the history of each program, their goals, services provided, and identified the needs that many programs face when facilitating farm leases and transfers. Figure 17 indicates the number of land link programs that responded to our survey, noting that the large number of programs in the northeast appeared to be reflective of the distribution of such services nationwide. Seven program administrators were further interviewed over the phone to discuss their responses to the survey in more detail.

Approximately fifty percent of the national programs surveyed were statewide, while a quarter serviced more than one state and a quarter covered a sub-region within a state. Two thirds of these land link programs participated in larger networks.
Several program administrators noted that the geographic scope of the service area affects the amount of individual assistance a program can offer. One administrator of a regional program noted, “A land access coordinator in each county to serve as a very local source of land access [would be helpful.]” Another commented that

“It would be ideal to have more staff with more time to work individually with each farmer to help get them the information and access to programs that they need.”
- Land Link Program Administrator

All respondents indicated that they maintained active listings for farmland for lease and sale while 85% also maintained a list of farmers searching for land. Seventy percent of these programs offer individual consultations while half provide some additional technical assistance. Types of technical assistance ranged from business planning, lease guidance, workshops, and referrals to state and federal agricultural support programs to individualized outreach designed to help farmers and landowners develop their goals over long-term participation in the program. The level of assistance varied considerably among programs. Some managed assistance directly, while others partnered with service providers and agencies such as the Farm Service Agency and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to help farmers with business planning and financing. Some of the programs surveyed required participants to complete training programs and/or have detailed business plans before being granted access to their database of landowners.

Organizational Capacity
Results indicated that land link programs often came as later additions to larger, existing agricultural support organizations (such as a cooperative extension office or state agricultural department). Consequently, many programs reported that there was not enough dedicated staff time to their programs. Non-profit organizations also reported having a limited capacity due to lack of funding.

“There is a need for consistent and long-term funding. These projects take time to develop and become successful - laying the groundwork to build a network that can then provide meaningful service to farmers is time consuming.”
—Land Link Program Administrator

These factors hinder the amount of outreach, personal consultations, and technical assistance they can provide, which can undermine leases that come from these programs.
“Another issue is farmer and farmland owner preparedness - in both cases, for the farmers and farmland owners, there is often training/education that is needed in order to facilitate better matches. For example, many farmers have not developed business/financial plans that would better prepare them for developing their farm business on a farm property; or, many farmland owners have not fully considered their personal and farmland goals that would help them to make more secure and successful matches with ‘the right” farmer.” - Land Link Program Administrator

Tracking impacts
Tracking the impact of their efforts was a common challenge among land link programs. This was due, in part, to the lack of staff time available to follow up with participants. Most respondents indicated that tracking the traditional metrics of success for farmer land access (the number of matches and acres of land leased or transferred to new farmers) was a significant challenge, making it difficult for program administrators to convey their program’s impact. Often once a farmer and a landowner connect through the program they forget to report their results to the service provided. Further, with many land match programs operating under funding constraints or as a corollary program inside a larger agricultural protection program, administrators often did not have the time to follow up with individuals over time.

“Participants are encouraged to let the program know when a farmer-landowner connection has been made (lease, sale, other opportunity, etc.), but they don’t always do so. An estimate is that a few connections (lease, sale, other opportunity) are made each year through the farm link program.”
—Land Link Program Administrator

Some programs required farmers and landowners to re-subscribe for their service on a regular (i.e. annual) schedule. This had the benefit of keeping a program’s list of land seekers and available farmland current, but it also provided the opportunity for program administrators to solicit information from the participants.

Several program administrators noted that some of their program’s greatest accomplishments were not easily quantifiable but had more to do with the role that their organization took on to increase land access for farmers.

“The program is now well-known across the state; it’s the ‘go-to’ land resource.” - Land Link program Administrator
PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of the Match Program as well as our review of national land link programs revealed that on the whole, the Match Program was highly successful but that several changes could be implemented to improve its overall effectiveness. We offer these recommendations for our own program but hope that others reading this report will find utility and applicability in some of our findings and resultant suggestions for improvement. Our list of recommendations includes:

1. Re-organize farmland protection programs into a single, more comprehensive Farmland Access, Resources, and Matching (FARM) Program
   - Establish a multi-track system that identifies all participants by experience and their specific goals to offer targeted assistance as experience and goals change over time;
   - Focus on improving the quality of leases and assisting farmers to secure long-term land tenure (through lease and purchase); and
   - Refine internal systems and outreach materials to help Match Program participants better achieve their land access goals through one-on-one consultations, on-line resources, and assistance with other land access tools such as agricultural support grants and conservation easements.

2. Maintain an updated user-friendly website
   - Enhance the web user interface to increase accessibility and appeal;
   - Maintain an updated online resource library;
   - Increase participants’ use of the listings and online resources by increased outreach efforts; and
   - Improve farm buyer page with more listings; keep listings active through increased realtor and landowner outreach. Increase efforts to identify affordable farm listings through enhanced outreach with farm sellers.

3. Establish a required annual re-subscription feature
   - Ensure listings on website are active;
   - Monitor participants match status, program use, experience level, and goals in order to continue offering appropriate assistance; and
   - The challenge of truly understanding the impacts that land link programs have is significant, given the lack of effective tracking systems. We recommend exploring ways to better engage program participants over the long-term to follow their progress, and to be able to offer assistance over time as needed.

4. Improve collaboration with regional partners
   - Continue learning from and supporting our regional partners so that together we can find better ways to enhance the clear strengths of our program that come from having a local presence while at the same time providing a streamlined regional network for program participants to utilize and navigate easily.

5. Explore ways to better utilize farmer volunteer services
   - Discuss with volunteer farmers how to better coordinate timing of requests for site visits with timing of volunteer visits, to ensure more timely response to landowner requests.
6. Increase outreach efforts to engage participants
   • Outreach is critical to broadening the effectiveness of programs like the Match Program;
   • Our results revealed that once participants took advantage of our services (staff assistance, on-line resources, etc) they were highly satisfied with the results; we need to find ways to encourage them to engage more with the program and outreach can help; and
   • Satisfaction with the workshop series could be improved by surveying Match Program participants to gauge when they would be most likely to attend a workshop and which topics would be most relevant to their needs. Simultaneously offering the series online, through a webcast, would also allow the workshops to reach more participants. Posting these workshops online for use as a future resource at the participants’ convenience would be beneficial for reaching a broader audience.

7. Expand and improve staff capacity when possible
   • Staff capacity was a notable limiting factor for the success of the Match program as well as similar programs across the country; and
   • Staff transitions can be especially challenging for land link programs that rely heavily on interpersonal relations. Consequently, programs like ours should find ways to clearly document and memorialize relevant information pertaining to conversations and interactions.

In addition to the above recommendations, we believe that additional work is needed to better understand what caused leases entered into with the assistance of our program to terminate, and to more methodically track the progress of program participants once they are no longer engaged with our services. Although we have compiled relevant and useful evidence in this regard, a future area of research could be to understand in greater depth the intricacies of lease arrangements associated with the Match Program over time, including how they evolve, when and if they terminate, and why. This information would enable us to help program participants establish longer term and more secure arrangements.
SUMMARY

Our analysis of the CLC/DLC Match Program, in combination with our review of similar programs across the county, revealed a number of significant and relevant findings. Perhaps foremost in importance for us was the fact that our program participants were satisfied with their experience of the program, yet appeared to be underutilizing staff expertise and other associated resources that could be of assistance to them. This highlighted a need to find more effective ways to reach and engage with program participants. Re-organizing and re-branding our services may help participants receive more targeted and therefore more useful assistance in this regard in order to increase the overall success rate of the programs.

The prevalence of successful lease arrangements on small plots of land indicate that many of the farms in our program support small-scale farmers, and therefore potentially play a significant role helping new and beginning farmers. Lease arrangements such as these have clear potential to better help new and beginning farmers afford to start new farm operations, learn, and experiment without having to lay out the cash necessary for a land purchase. However, establishing arrangements that will provide the security farmers need to invest in their businesses takes work, time, communication, and commitment on the part of both parties.

Our findings showed that for landowners engaged with the Match Program their primary incentive was keeping their land in agriculture, rather than receiving the tax abatement advantages associated with farmland leasing. This finding is promising, as it suggests that many landowners are interested in working with farmers to craft agricultural leases that meet the needs of a farm business, rather than solely crafting an agreement with the primary intention of obtaining a tax abatement. This presents us with a significant opportunity to better engage with the landowners in our program.

This work could include exploring more opportunities to bring farmers and non-farming landowners together to interact, learn from each other, and find areas of commonality, as well as identifying...
those landowners who are more interested in land access issues and to explore leases that are more favorable for farmers.

It was clear from the results of our analysis that most farmers in our program hoped to someday own a farm of their own. This understanding helps place our Match Program in a useful context regarding the role the program can play in the trajectory of a farmer’s career. Although it has numerous associated challenges and limitations, farmland leasing will likely continue to play a critical role in a farmer’s ability to access land in the years to come, offering a platform through which farmers can begin and expand their businesses.

Although our program was created around a unique set of dynamics and challenges, much of what we experienced when starting as well as maintaining our program was echoed in our conversations with farm link program administrators across the nation. Programs like ours that are engaged with farmland leasing assistance should continue finding ways to help program participants develop relationships and associated documents that provide security, comfort, and meet the parties’ mutual goals as effectively as possible.

We are grateful for all of the many individuals who assisted with the creation of this report by taking the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us. Working together, we can help shape the face of farming over the next few decades by addressing the needs and challenges of the next generation of farmers.
Farmer Profile: Great Song Farm

Anthony Mecca met Betti and Larry Steel of Milan, New York, through the Farmer-Landowner Match Program. Anthony first came to the Hudson Valley with an interest in pursuing biodynamic agriculture.

After working with other biodynamic farmers, Anthony decided to look for land that could support a Community Supported Agriculture business truly focused on the community, including public community events, a you-pick garden, and sliding scale memberships to increase food security.

After first joining the Match Program in 2011, Anthony created a long list of landowners to contact. He estimates that he methodically went through his list, speaking with over a hundred looking for the right fit. The Steels, whose property is in Dutchess County, were among those landowners and the two parties hit it off.

Anthony and his co-operator, Sarah Hearn, have developed Great Song Farm into a 100-member CSA designed to bring their community together. Now in its eighth growing season, Great Song Farm grows two-and-a-half acres of vegetables, pastures chickens and cattle on approximately 30 acres, and maintains two dozen beehives. They continue to host dinners open to the public. There is farmer housing on-site along with a cooler and a barn.

The Steels meanwhile have enjoyed watching their property become the center of the community and get a great satisfaction from their property being put to such a use. In addition to opening their 88-acre property to this operation and in turn to the community, the Steels worked with DLC to protect the land with a conservation easement in 2016 to ensure that it remains available for farming into the future.
Farmer Profile: Full Circus Farm
Miriam Goler and Mark Stonehill started Full Circus Farm in Pine Plains, New York, in 2014. Now in their fourth year of operation, the couple leases 20 acres, rotating crops for their 50-member CSA and growing some fruit tree nursery stock. Their story shows how the Farmer-Landowner Match Program works well for farmers who have developed a business plan and worked to establish a secure lease.

Miriam and Mark joined the Match Program after years of studying agriculture in college and becoming involved in urban farming and food justice. After apprenticing on farms in Maine for several seasons, they committed to becoming full-time farmers and completed the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association Journeyperson Program. As part of this program they grew organic vegetables on a horse-powered farm and developed a clear vision for what their own operation could look like, but they were left wondering where they should set up shop.

They enjoyed living in Maine but hoped to be closer to their families in New York City. For several reasons, the Hudson Valley seemed like a good fit, but land prices put land ownership out of reach. They considered applying for several farm manager positions. However, in the end they wanted their own business.

They joined the Match Program in December of 2013, and on an extended visit back to New York in January came up with a long list of landowners to contact. After initial conversations, Mark and Miriam met with four or five landowners at their properties, met the landowners, and found the land they would eventually lease.

Over the next seven months, the farmers and landowners hammered out the many details for their lease. Relying on lawyers and assistance from CLC staff, the two parties came up with an arrangement that afforded Full Circus Farm housing and security to invest in their business while also protecting the landowners’ interests.

They signed a five-year lease that re-certifies every three years, which ensures the farmers will always have two years’ lead time if they must relocate. The apartment on the property is leased to them at a nominal rate as long as they maintain their farm lease. They shared the cost of improvements, such as installing hoop houses and a cooler, where the landowners bought the materials and then Mark and Miriam put in the labor. This example shows what is possible when prepared farmers meet landowners who are interested in farmers actively working the land.

Miriam suggests that other farmers considering similar leases learn from their experience; have a clear sense of goals when reaching out to landowners, and spend time getting to know the landowners before signing a lease. Even when both parties want the same outcome, finding a balance between the two interests can be tricky. The months they spent preparing their lease have been worth it. As for settling into the Hudson Valley, Miriam is very happy with their decision. She says, ‘The farming community has been so helpful and welcoming and generous, especially early on when we really needed help.”
Farmer Profile: Diamond Hills Farm
Diamond Hills Farm represents how the Match Program can help farmers explore various business models without over-extending themselves with a mortgage or capital improvements. Jason Detzel operates Diamond Hills Farm on a 250-acre property in Columbia County. Jason began raising cattle here in 2012, but this story reaches back a bit further.

In 2010, CLC helped a pair of beginning farmers locate land for their beef and sheep operation. They had been farming on other local farms previously and decided to start their own business. With help from the Farmer-Landowner Match Program, the farmers contacted the landowners and after negotiating terms signed a 10-year lease. They also installed fencing for 80 acres of pasture. After operating their business through a few seasons, the farmers decided to move away from their business and began to look for someone who would be interested in taking over their lease.

At the same time, Jason was apprenticing at farms in Virginia. For several years he had been having an ongoing conversation with a friend of his who was living in New York about starting a farm. Although they had both been long-time vegetarians, they decided that sustainably grown beef would be the best fit for their business plan, and were left wondering where they should farm. A series of events led them to the Hudson Valley where they began to look for available farmland. As beginning farmers who could not purchase land, they remained flexible with their business plan to accommodate whatever land opportunities arose.

After a six-month search for land, Jason and Lori found Awesome Farm. Its location in Claverack, the installed fencing, and the 10-year lease made this a perfect fit. Diamond Hills Farm had found its home, and Awesome Farm was able to sell its infrastructure.

Since that time, Diamond Hills Farm has gone through several changes. A significant change is that Jason now operates the business himself. This, along with the fact that he works full-time as an agricultural service provider for a nearby cooperative extension office, has helped to shape the farm.

For several years, in order to minimize his capital investment in equipment and labor time in growing hay, Jason purchased hay for winter feed and sold his meat at farmers markets and through direct sales. More recently, Jason has been purchasing stocker cattle in the spring, raising them on grass throughout the season, and then selling them in the fall. This accommodates his schedule, and still allows him to prioritize care for the animals and stewardship of the land.