



# LSP's Farm Beginnings®

*Rotating in a new generation of farmers.*

## What is Farm Beginnings & how did it get started?

Farm Beginnings® is a Land Stewardship Project (LSP) initiative that provides participants an opportunity to learn firsthand about low-cost, sustainable methods of farming.

Farm Beginnings started in 1997 when a group of southeast Minnesota farmers called the "Wabasha County Give A Damns" approached LSP with concerns about where the next generation of farmers would come from. These farmers saw a need for a program that would combine classroom instruction and on-farm mentoring. What resulted was an initiative that has its roots in the philosophy that farmers learn new techniques and management systems best by networking with other farmers. The first Farm Beginnings classes began meeting in southeast Minnesota. Eventually, the program was successfully expanded to western Minnesota.



## Why is such a program needed?

Making a go of it in farming today can be very difficult. However, a growing group of farmers are showing that through the use of low-cost techniques, creative marketing and whole farm planning, one can develop a farming operation that is economically viable and provides a good quality of life.

Studies show that a major barrier to adopting "sustainable" farming methods is lack of information and first-hand knowledge related to such systems. A Northwest Area Foundation study found that farmers adopting alternative production methods were more likely to be successful if they were part of some sort of formal or informal network of like-minded farmers.

Another potential barrier to getting started in farming is lack of access to capital. A 2003 survey of farmers, lenders and agricultural educators in Minnesota and Wisconsin found that not having a good business plan was a major impediment to getting financing for alternative enterprises.

By providing a good foundation in business planning while creating the opportunity for participants to network with established farmers, Farm Beginnings helps knock down two major barriers to the adoption of innovative agricultural systems.

## What does the Farm Beginnings course consist of?

Farm Beginnings classes begin in the fall of each year and meet throughout the winter. Class participants learn goal setting, financial planning, business plan creation, alternative marketing and low-cost sustainable farming techniques. Participants are encouraged to develop a sustainable business plan that enhances their quality of life/goals — a plan that factors in sound environmental practices while being economically viable. Established farmers and other professionals such as lenders and agricultural business instructors present at the seminars, providing a strong foundation of community resources, networks and contacts for those interested in farming. The highlight of the winter classes is a set of presentations given by beginning farmers outlining their goals and how they plan on achieving them.

These relationships often last long after the formalized course is concluded. At the conclusion of classes, Farm Beginnings moves onto the land itself, where participants take part in a series of on-farm field days during the spring and summer. At these field days, innovative farmers demonstrate firsthand how they raise food and fiber using methods that are economically and environmentally sound. The on-farm education component is a critical part of the learn-

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ing. Participants find themselves touring a variety of farms in addition to having a one-on-one experience with a specific farmer. Throughout the 10-month course, participants are encouraged to utilize established farmers as mentors.

## **The Livestock Loan Program**

In a further effort to help people get launched in their farming careers, Farm Beginnings has partnered with Heifer International to provide a zero interest revolving livestock loan for qualified beginning farmers. The Livestock Loan Program helps farmers build equity while supporting them with a continuing education component that connects them with an adviser. Eighteen livestock loans totaling over \$200,000 have been awarded to Farm Beginnings graduates. Seven loan recipients have paid back the loan money in full, making it possible for other beginning farmers to use the money for the purchase of animals.

## **How successful is Farm Beginnings?**

- During the first decade of the initiative, more than 300 people have completed or are enrolled in the Farm Beginnings course in southeast and western Minnesota.
- Over 60 percent of those graduates are farming.
- Over 6,000 acres of land is owned, rented or otherwise farmed by Farm Beginnings graduates.
- Farm Beginnings graduates are engaged in a broad spectrum of farming enterprises: beef, dairy, hogs, meat goats, poultry, wholesale vegetables, Community Supported Agriculture, organic grains and specialty products such as cut flowers.
- Sixty-six percent of the course graduates who are farming say their net farm income has increased since taking Farm Beginnings. The average net farm income increase is \$12,500.

## **What's next: Farm Beginnings pilots in Illinois, Nebraska & North Dakota**

As Farm Beginnings enters its 11th year, it has become evident that there is a burgeoning demand for this kind of service. The Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings program has helped set up pilot beginning farmer education programs in Illinois, Nebraska and North Dakota. LSP staff members worked with agricultural educators, farmers and other professionals to set up the pilot programs. A pilot Farm Beginnings program is now in the works for the Lake Superior region of northeast Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin.

*“Not only did Farm Beginnings give us an opportunity to learn in the classroom, but it connected us with successful beginning and established farmers, giving us a variety of ideas and people to call upon for help. These connections have allowed us to see hope for ourselves and for the future of agriculture.”*

—Roger & Michelle Benrud,  
Class of 1998

## **Are you a beginning farmer?**

If you are a beginning farmer who is interested in learning more about Farm Beginnings, there are several ways to get started:

### **On the Internet**

[www.farmbeginnings.org](http://www.farmbeginnings.org)

### **Minnesota**

→ **Southeast Minnesota** — Contact Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366, [stettler@landstewardshipproject.org](mailto:stettler@landstewardshipproject.org).

→ **Western Minnesota** — Contact Amy Bacigalupo, [amyb@landstewardshipproject.org](mailto:amyb@landstewardshipproject.org), 320-269-2105.

### **Lake Superior Region**

→ **Cree Bradley**, Lake Superior Sustainable Farming Association, 218-834-0846 or [cree@lakesuperiorfarming.org](mailto:cree@lakesuperiorfarming.org); website: [www.lakesuperiorfarming.org](http://www.lakesuperiorfarming.org).

### **North Dakota**

→ **Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resources Management and Sustainability** — Contact Britt Jacobson, 701-486-3569 or [info@farms.org](mailto:info@farms.org); website: [www.farms.org](http://www.farms.org).

### **Illinois**

→ **Stateline (Northern Illinois)**—Contact Parker Forsell, 815-389-8455 or [CRAFT@learnrowconnect.org](mailto:CRAFT@learnrowconnect.org); website: [www.csalearningcenter.org](http://www.csalearningcenter.org).

→ **Central Illinois**—Contact Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant, 217-968-5512 or [cvnghgrn@uiuc.edu](mailto:cvnghgrn@uiuc.edu); website: [www.farmbeginnings.uiuc.edu](http://www.farmbeginnings.uiuc.edu).

### **Nebraska**

→ Martin Kleinschmit, 402-254-6893, [martink@cfra.org](mailto:martink@cfra.org).

## **Are you an established farmer?**

Farm Beginnings is also looking for established farmers who are willing to serve as mentors. If you are interested, we'd love to hear from you.

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*This fact sheet is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 651-653-0618 or visit [www.landstewardshipproject.org](http://www.landstewardshipproject.org).*