

Guidelines for Selecting Farmland

Looking for a small farm to buy and operate? If you live in the city or suburbs, suburban counties surrounding metropolitan areas are good regions to look into. You will be within commuting distance of your job and, therefore, be able to continue to work while you establish your alternative farm enterprise.

The decision about whether or not a farm is right for you is often a difficult one to make. Be aware that the resources on the farm will dictate what enterprises you will be able to establish successfully. Individuals who purchase small farms before planning what to produce—and typically this happens—often limit the type and size of farm enterprises available to them.

It is wise, therefore, for prospective buyers to determine land use needs and goals prior to purchasing.

You can accomplish this by developing a business plan for the farm. Your farm plan does not have to be anything complicated. It does require you to outline why you are in business, what your objectives are, and how you are going to reach them. A basic plan will include a statement of goals/objectives, a detailed production plan, a financial plan, a budget, staffing/organizational plans, management/contingency plans, marketing plans, and action plans. A sound, detailed farm plan will provide you with valuable support when you apply for a bank loan to purchase your farmland.

Following are some guidelines for looking for that right piece of land.

I. Acreage

Some long-range planning of potential enterprises and personal goals may help you to determine what size farm to purchase. Be aware that sometimes



the size of a farm can be misleading. For instance, a farm may be listed as having 10 acres, but the number of acres of usable cropland may be limited to five. Unless you are only going to pasture livestock, do not consider buying marginal land. Marginal land suffers from such unfavorable growing conditions as poor drainage, severe slope, insufficient topsoil, and soil that is droughty, excessively rocky, or shallow. You can expect poor or limited crop yields from marginal soils, making them unsuitable for high-value crop enterprises such as organic fruits and vegetables, landscape plants, cut flowers, and other specialty crops. The high production costs of these crops require a high yield in order to make a profit. You can modify some marginal land conditions by using drain tiles or through irrigation or soil conditioning or by utilizing soil conservation practices. These modifications can add significant cost to your farm operation; only make these changes in consultation with the county Soil Conservation District or Cooperative Extension.

Break a prospective farm down into the number of acres each of tillable land, pasture, and woodland. Compare this acreage to the acreage you need based on your farm plan. Does this farm provide you with enough land and is the soil the right quality for the crops you plan to grow? If the farm contains pasture, which you are not planning to use, consider the option of renting it. If the farm offers mature woodland, you can harvest trees by selective cutting and sell the lumber. The profit from the sale may even provide enough money to fund your new farming operation.

The ultimate availability of land, along with money, is the limiting factor in the future expansion of a farm operation. Therefore, a good farm plan will also take into account the future of your farm enterprises. If you plan on expanding the enterprises, you may need additional land. Rented farmland can help you to support expansion; however, because rented land is not always a reliable alternative, do not base any long-range planning on its use.

II. Water

You need to evaluate any prospective farmland for the availability of water. Research the site for any history of flooding. An untimely flood during the growing season can be devastating. Also, investigate the possibilities of available and reliable water sources; it may be necessary to establish an irrigation system during prolonged dry periods. Check the water-holding capacity of the soil. Light and shallow soils will need irrigation for consistent production. Irrigation can also be used to protect sensitive crops, such as strawberries in flower and early-planted summer annuals, against frost damage; irrigation may therefore become a necessary part of future plans.

III. Geographic Location

The main consideration with location is proximity to your target market. Many farmers don't think about this, or worse, don't take advantage of it. Consider the availability of easy access to major highways. Individuals planning pick-your-own operations or bed and breakfast enterprises need to pay particular attention to location and accessibility.

IV. Access

If you expect customers to come to your farm to purchase the fruits of your labor, the public needs to have easy access to the farm. Your farm should be easy to find, offer plenty of parking, and be accessible by decent roads. The routes leading onto the farm should be wide enough to accommodate equipment needed to support farm production, e.g., field gates must be wide enough for equipment to pass through.

V. Security

Security is something that too many farmers fail to think about until it is too late. Theft of equipment, crops, and cattle are not uncommon. Even cut-your-own Christmas tree operations suffer from theft. Joy riders driving off-road vehicles can cause serious damage to crops. Evaluate the land's proximity to dwellings and housing devel-

opments. Check to see if fields are visible from the farmhouse.

If the farm has fencing, check to see if it is in good condition without visible rot in the posts or corrosion in the wires. A perimeter fence—one that encircles the farm or animal operation—offers the highest level of security and operational efficiency. If you plan to raise animals, you will need a fence that meets the security requirements for an animal enterprise; these requirements vary with animal species. For most enterprises, the fence should be electrified. A single strand of electrified wire is adequate for beef cattle interior fencing; however, sheep require three strands of electrified wire. A good multistrand electrified perimeter fence allows for the easy connection of portable interior electrified fence products, making it possible for you to design your preferred grazing system. A sound electrified perimeter fence is a necessity if you are to keep predators away from vulnerable animals such as sheep and chickens.

VI. Wildlife

Some species of wildlife are very destructive to crops. Deer, geese, birds, and groundhogs head the list of animals that can be frustrating to control, since laws protect many species of wildlife. Give some thought to the ability of the surrounding property to support wildlife. If the land is next to a tree farm or state park, the deer population will never be under control. Land next to a body of water that supports waterfowl offers a similar scenario. The crops grown on this land will wind up providing food for a resident flock of geese.

VII. Air Drainage

Plants need fresh air and air movement for healthy growth. Most high-value crops do not favor low-lying land with restricted air movement. These areas are best suited for field and forage crops. The lack of airflow across low-lying land causes dampness and pollutants to pool and cold air to settle on

frosty mornings, causing the air temperature to be colder than air on higher ground. On low-lying land, June-bearing strawberry flowers will be vulnerable to midspring frosts. Once killed by frost, the flower no longer produces fruit. Also, any early planted summer annual vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, and beans will be killed by a spring frost. Locating fields with good air drainage (e.g., not in low valleys, but on higher ground) will provide a longer frost-free growing period.

VIII. Sources of Information

There are several federal, state, and local agencies available to assist you with researching and evaluating potential farms. These include the county offices of Maryland Cooperative Extension; the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); the Soil Conservation District; the Farm Service Agency, which falls under the U.S. Department of Agriculture; the State Department of Natural Resources; and county departments of planning and zoning (for residents of Prince George's and Montgomery Counties, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission handles planning and zoning). These agencies can all be found in the local, state, and federal government sections of your telephone book. The NRCS, formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service, is a federal agency under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. NRCS works at the county level through the Soil Conservation District. Utilize all of the resources available to you before making a final decision about purchasing land for a farming operation.

References

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