

**CHIPPEWA 10%**  
**Promoting Perennials for Local Farms**  
**January 2011**

Prepared by *ActionMedia* for  
Land Stewardship Project

## INTRODUCTION

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*“The farmer can make a lot of decisions, lots of choices. That’s the good thing about being a farmer, being your own boss. You can decide what land to get, what to do with it - if the land is better for livestock, you can do that. You can make money in many different ways. And choices of how to take care of it so it stays productive - that’s all in our hands.”*

*“Long term viability is the name of the game because you’ll only raise 40 crops in a lifetime. You can’t rape the land and strip the soil, and most farmers don’t. Nutrient management is so expensive you’d be a fool not to manage your soil. Farms are going to be multi-generational. You want to pass on good soil.”*

In December 2010 – January 2011, ActionMedia conducted in-depth interviews with 19 farm land owners who live in the Chippewa Valley watershed, randomly selected from property roles. None of these farmers farm a total of more than 1500 acres on land they own and lease. Five of the farmers were under 60 years of age; nine of the farmers lease some or all of their land to others (often family members) to farm. Ten grow row crops only; nine are in cattle or dairy, most of these also in row crop production. Previously, we conducted a focus group with six farmers who have agreed to serve as Advisors to the project. This group consisted entirely of individuals who are in general agreement with the project’s objectives, and who themselves have made decisions consistent with the Chippewa 10% project’s goals. The discussion with them surfaced some shared experiences, values and assumptions which were used to design the 15-20 minute telephone interviews with farmers in the target audience: those who have not yet made such decisions.

The research supports the project’s two related but distinct communication goals: to help individual farmers make individual, specific decisions that will depend on a diverse range of individual circumstances; and, to describe the project in terms that farmers will accept and identify with, so that, when circumstance allows, they are open to considering such changes.

Though conceived as a way to protect water quality, the project is not likely to be successfully advanced with farmers on that basis. The farmers in our sample think the water quality is fine, and, in any case, strongly believe they and other farmers are good stewards of the water and soil resource. They view themselves as, and believe other farmers ought to be, realistic business people, who closely attend to markets, costs, technological and policy conditions. For this reason, statements about farming must be seen as based in real market terms; otherwise farmers are liable to interpret them as being unrealistic, nostalgic, or over-sold.

The research indicates that successful messages will take a multi-year perspective, will focus on the operation of the current farm business, and on the long-term value of the farm itself as an asset. Advocates should evoke and build communication around core values widely shared by these farmers:

- The security and future of their own business operation;
- The opportunity for the next generation to get into farming; and
- The importance of local ownership and control of local farm land.

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## FARM BUSINESS DECISIONS

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*“For years, they always told me, some day you’re going to feed the world. And now that day is here, we have China, India, billions of mouths to feed, and they’ve got money. It’s finally caught up.”*

*“Things aren’t always going to be like this. It’s good right now, but it’s not usually good for long. What might change? Something we have no idea about, a terrorist attack, could be anything. I heard the Euro’s in trouble now, if that crashes...”*

*“I think you could sell organic, and vegetables for local market. And meat - we used to raise pigs, we could sell ‘em in a heartbeat, because we kept the drugs out of them. There’s a good market for that meat if you keep the drugs out, pigs and cows both.”*

*“We’ve always had small farms, used to have a lot more, but the larger farms will continue and stay big. But there’s still room, always will be, for the small farm with niche production - a special crop that can produce enough income for the family.”*

Farmers view their independence as among the highest values farming has to them – “being my own boss.” They believe they are making choices (and having plenty of choices to make) all the time, and, whatever the truth of the matter, they believe they make decisions based on their attention to markets and to technological innovations.

Many report that some decisions about their business operations are determined by the specific and different fields they own, and the appropriateness of those fields for pasture, specialty crops, etc. They also make decisions based on their age and personal circumstances. These attitudes are consistent with the actual reported experiences of the Advisory group members that led them to put more land in perennials.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Describe the decisions farmers might make in terms of their own varied specific circumstances, and put these decisions in the context of a multi-year timeline – not only next season, but also for 3, 6, or 10 years or more out.

Whether actively farming or leasing their land to others, the key factor determining their own business choices is the current high price of commodities. Although concerns are expressed about the resultant high cost of farm leases (and possible impact of that cost on livestock producers), the current markets for corn are seen as a boon for farmers, increasing their range of choices and improving their prospects.

They all believe prices and other conditions are subject to change. Most believe prices won’t be sustained at their current high levels, but they do expect the corn and bean markets to remain strong. In considering specific choices they themselves might make about what to produce, and in thinking about the prospect for someone else making choices about specialty crops or producing for local markets, they believe it is possible, and necessary, to calculate costs, yields and profits. If it doesn’t “pencil out,” the farmer can’t do it.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Pencil it out, one farmer and one field at a time. Inoculate against nostalgia or wishful thinking by stressing real world business examples, specific individual circumstances and new techniques or opportunities. Make it clear that different approaches are appropriate for different farms.

A significant portion believes there is opportunity in specialty crops, local vegetables, and organic meat. Most believe there is some room for this segment of local agriculture and that there may be opportunity for it to grow; but even the most positive about this are careful to state that it will never replace the current dominance of production farming.

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*“If all your eggs are in one basket you’re asking for trouble. Need to be spread out.”*

*“We don’t have to hit a home run on everything. You don’t know what the year’s going to bring - this way, the income stays more stable and steady, not a lot of highs and lows.”*

*“Specialty crops are an expanding market. You don’t want just one fish in the pond.”*

Most of these farmers agree with the general principle that a farmer is more secure if the operation has more than one product and more than one income stream – “you want to have more than one fish in the pond.” This was a majority view among those who include some livestock in their operation, and practice some diversity of cropping in their current operation. But significantly, half of those in only row crop production still agree that diversity makes sense for farm operations. These farmers point to their past experience – prices go up and down – and to the inherent uncertainty of predicting the future.

Even those who believe markets and farm policy make diversity challenging are drawn to the idea of farms that have a range of products. They explain that “they would like to think” it’s realistic, but “a guy would starve”, and it simply is not possible in today’s farm economy. This suggests that messages about diversified cropping should be careful not to imply nostalgia for the past, but should apply the serious business calculation farmers believe is required.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Talk about increasing the security of the farm’s business, near-term and over the future. Talk about diversified cropping and livestock as business options, not in terms of their esthetic, environmental or community values but as a more flexible and adaptable approach to markets that may change in the future.

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## ENVIRONMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

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*“Specialty crops, energy crops will play a big role in the future. Corn is not going to be the crop for ethanol. There will be alternative crops. I’ve seen such huge changes in the last 50 years - if they’re as big in the next 25 years, I have no idea. Probably we’ll have guys just sit with a joystick, running a few fields at once, no guy in the cab, just automated.”*

*“You want to leave the land in better condition than you found it. You cannot lose your biggest asset.”*

*“Non-farming people don’t understand that the fertilizers and chemicals are a part of modern day farming, without them they’d pay a lot more for food. And the truth is, the land is not wearing out.”*

These farmers pride themselves on being up-to-date. The most significant changes over past decades in farm land use is generally described in terms of improvements in technology and technique: pattern tiling, no-till or chisel plowing, improvements in chemicals and chemical use, and genetic engineering. In commenting on such changes, these farmers frequently referred to keeping up with the times and recognizing current reality without indulging in nostalgia for an (admittedly attractive) past.

They anticipate that the future will bring more technological innovation: new high-yield strains, improvements in technique and tools, further mechanization. Several also referred to the inherent uncertainty of predicting the future – the only thing for certain is that things won’t remain the same.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Acknowledge advances in technology and make all communications based in current conditions and events. Talk about possible types of changes (e.g., in Federal policy) and the choices farmers might make today to better prepare their farm for an uncertain future.

Farmers who were asked, characterized local water quality as good, and claimed not to know if it is better or worse than in the past. No farmers interviewed mentioned water or environmental quality in describing how land use has changed in their lifetimes. Several mentioned no-till or chisel plowing as a positive change they and others have made; some referred to improvements in the safety of chemicals being used.

This is the most pronounced attitudinal difference between the random sample and the Advisory group members, who do believe current practices harm the environment. Farmers see themselves as excellent stewards of the environment. They engage in conservation practices, and are careful about inputs, as a way to preserve their farm as an asset – maintaining the soil and maintaining future yields. The generalized environmental benefits are distinctly secondary to this perspective, but are not seen as antithetical to their goals. Several farmers did mention more land in CRP as a change in local land use. Most do not have land in CRP, and do not intend to put any into the program. Several commented that it is a good option for retiring farmers, but none spoke to the general environmental benefits.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Describe the area as Douglas, Pope and Swift Counties, not as a watershed. Exclude reference to water quality in communications targeted to farmers, and give it low priority in general descriptions of the project.

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## **FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND LOCAL CONTROL**

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*“I hope it continues, I have 2 sons and a daughter, they’re young yet, but yeah, that’s every farmer’s hope”*

*“I had people after me to lease ‘em the land, offered good money too, but I held firm. Then my son-in-law started renting some, and 2 years ago my grandson came back to the area, so this is how he can get into farming, I wanted to my family get into it.”*

*“Certain people try to rent your farm away from you. They’ll pay more rent, and just keep adding land. And people are buying land, paying dear, so our taxes go up.”*

*“We’ve got guys running land for 50 miles instead of 5. That means there isn’t as many people making a living off it, one guy runs the whole county: he sets the rents, the input costs, he can raise the prices from 200 miles away.”*

*“It’s destroying rural America to be honest. You don’t need to farm that much to make a living.”*

Ten of the nineteen farmers interviewed farm with or lease land to family, and several of the others mentioned their children’s potential interest. In this, these farmers are very like the Advisory group members: they strongly value family, farming with family members, and passing the farm on to family. Nearly all of the respondents expressed dismay at the obstacles – chiefly, land costs -- for young people seeking to get into farming.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Explicitly refer to families, farm families, and to the next generation of farmers. Where possible, use young people from the community, and owners of new business start-ups, as messengers.

Asked to describe “the biggest problems facing the communities in your area”, most respondents offered variations on the problems attendant to population loss – jobs, schools, hospitals. They see this largely as a result of increased farm size, fewer farmers on the same land base. They speak about all of these things – family, the next generation of farming, the losses of population, and the increase in size of farms – with conviction and strong feeling.

Many referred to past practices, when there were more farmers doing a wider variety of things, as desirable, but also referred to nostalgia. Most respondents believe the big will continue to get bigger, and that the small diversified farm, while it may (and they hope it does) continue to exist into the future, is largely a sign of the past.

A substantial portion of the respondents explicitly linked the “super-big” farm and its attendant negative consequences to out of area land owners, and to farmers leasing acreage who are based out of the area, and who are not part of the community’s economic or civic life. Out of town farmers don’t spend any money locally. They buy or lease up the land at high prices (“don’t care what they pay”) effectively shutting out new farmers. These large operators working local and distant separated fields rarely visit their fields and are not thinking long-term. Feelings of resentment and disapproval were readily expressed.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Emphasize locally owned and operated farms, and link this with the future viability of farmland as a family asset, a farming entry point and with the future of local communities.

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## SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Evoked shared values:

- **Security.** Applies both to the security of individual farm businesses into the future, diversifying income streams, and to the long-term viability of the asset in terms of preserving options.
- **Family.** Relates to the idea of the next generation of farmers.
- **Independent Business and business acumen.** Recognizing and taking advantage of business opportunities, and “penciling out” the numbers. This also relates to business planning, including having an exit strategy.
- **Local ownership and control.** It is unnecessary to catalogue the problems with out-of-area control or to demonize any segment of the farm community. Explicitly and consistently refer to local farms and especially to local farmers.

**Establish the context as “your farm business”.** Assume every farmer knows his or her business better than you do, and that every individual’s farm decisions will be rooted in their individual circumstances, including land particulars, preferences and goals, and stage of life. Couch the decisions farmers must make in terms of preserving the asset as a viable entry point for farming’s next generation. Explicitly talk about planning ahead, next season and three, six, ten or more years out.

**Define the issue as increasing or securing the value of your asset.** Both the current farm business and the farm itself. This goes both to making decisions to diversify crops and to passing on the farm to the next generation: what will you be leaving to them?

**Re-name the project.** Continue to use the name “Profits from Perennials” for specific pieces or events where specifics about costs and return are being discussed. Evoke one or more of the core values in the name. Possibilities: Perennial Options; Perennials for Local Farmers; Perennial Markets/ Local Farms; New Markets for Local Farmers; ???

**Target audiences.** Recommended targets include farmers of pre-retirement age, farmers already engaged in some livestock or specialty crops, and farmers targeted by control of specific fields, either because of their appropriateness for perennials or for their location.

**Emphasize farmer participation in community-wide efforts** to develop local markets and new market opportunities.

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