

So You Want To Start A Small Farm Business?

by Mary Fahey, Colusa County Resource Conservation District

While many people choose to live on small acreage properties simply to enjoy a rural lifestyle, some folks purchase property with the intent to make a living off the land. While this is an exciting notion, poorly planned enterprises can lead to a number of disasters including damaged natural resources, strained family relationships and financial difficulties.

As with any entrepreneurial endeavor, emphasis should be placed on thorough planning and evaluation of your resources before starting a new small farm-based business. Some things to consider are: personal and family goals, existing resources including your time and energy level, and realistic opportunities for business sales. You should also take into consideration your level of knowledge of land and natural resource management. Creating a business plan is an excellent way to work through the planning and decision-making process, and there are many resources that can help with this, some of which are listed at the end of this article.

The more you can learn, plan and prepare before launching a new business, the better your chances of success.

There are a variety of options for generating income off of small acreage, but realistically, it is very difficult to make a comfortable living without another source of income such as off-farm employment. The section below outlines some possibilities. Sustainability depends on several factors including your location, land resources, energy level and marketing skills. Another important factor is your desired lifestyle. If you are willing to live very frugally, you will obviously be able to live with less income than someone who is not willing to give up any modern comforts.

While evaluating your situation, always bear in mind that maintaining healthy natural resources on your land is essential to a productive farming system. A healthy and diverse system will produce healthier crops and livestock.

Opportunities

Some small farm production opportunities include: fruit and vegetable crops; livestock production (milk, meat, cheese, fiber, brush clearing); poultry (meat, eggs); honey bees (honey, pollination services, beeswax); cut flowers; nursery stock; value-added products (crafts, wreaths, etc.); agritourism (farm stay, farm tours, etc.); and teaching classes.

You might consider starting a market garden by growing a variety of seasonal vegetables and fruit. If done properly in the right geographic location, it is possible to make a decent income off of a small parcel of land. It takes a lot of dedication, hard work and long hours, but it can be done. Of course, growing the crops is just one aspect of the business. You will also have to market and sell your products. Fresh fruit and vegetables can be sold at farmers markets, farm stands, CSAs (local deliveries), or wholesale to restaurants and grocery stores. Cut flowers can be integrated into a market garden business, or they can be the single focus of a farm-based business. Fresh cut flowers can be sold through the same outlets as fruit and vegetables. Livestock products, such as meat, eggs and fiber can also be sold at farmers markets and farm stands. Meat and eggs can be marketed to restaurants and grocery stores, and even local deliveries. Fiber can be made into value-added products such as yarn or knitted and woven items and sold through a variety of markets including online. Another possible livestock business is maintaining a goat herd to rent out for brush control.



Raising poultry for meat or egg production is one option for a small farm business

Infrastructure

Depending on your production goals, you will need equipment and facilities to carry out your business. Some of the basics include:

- **Vegetable and tree crops:** irrigation water, irrigation supplies, seed, soil amendments and fertilizers, pest control, hand tools, tractor, cultivating equipment, planting equipment, harvest equipment, greenhouse, packing shed, refrigeration
- **Livestock:** fencing, water, pasture, supplemental feed, shelters/housing facilities, veterinary care, medical supplies, lead ropes and halters, transportation, manure management tools

Natural Resources

Efforts should be made to keep your land healthy and productive by protecting your natural resources. Integrating the following options into your farming system will serve to create biodiversity on your land while improving water and soil quality as well as habitat value:

- Plant a variety of flowering native shrubs and forbs to provide habitat for native pollinators
- Install native habitat in the form of hedgerows or mass plantings of native plants in unused areas of your farm
- Provide buffer strips between crops/livestock and waterways and plant native grasses along banks of waterways to filter runoff and prevent bank erosion
- Practice crop rotation and managed livestock grazing to keep your soil and pastures healthy while reducing weed and pest populations
- Utilize cover crops for soil health and for a source of pollen and nectar for beneficial insects

- Be diligent with invasive species control
- Install a wildlife pond
- Install raptor nest boxes for natural rodent control
- Compost everything you can and return it to the ground to reduce waste and enrich the soil

Diversify Your Operation

Any agricultural endeavor is dependent on the forces of Mother Nature, and production will vary from year to year. Bearing this in mind, it would be wise to diversify your operation so if one crop fails or disease strikes your livestock, you will have something to fall back on. Wise management decisions will keep your land healthy, but you cannot control natural variables that are bound to affect your operation. A simple way to diversify your operation is to grow a variety of crops that might include vegetables, fruit, nuts and/or grains. If one crop fails, you have other resources. You could take this a step further and integrate chickens for egg or meat production. This way, if it is a late spring and your spring/summer crops are delayed, you will still have poultry producing a product for the farm. Creating value-added products, teaching farm-oriented classes or providing farm tours are other good ways to diversify your operation, and these activities can take place nearly year-round.

There are many options available for creating a small farm business, but there are also many variables to take into consideration when deciding on a venture. The more you can learn, plan and prepare before launching a new business, the better your chances of success. Take classes, attend workshops, visit working farms and do your research. You may find a perfect fit for your farm and your family, or you may decide that a farm business is not for you. Either way, doing the research will teach you a lot about yourself, your land, and what it takes to produce farm products. So, if you're ready to investigate your options for starting a small farm business, the following links can help you get started.

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Planning Resources:

U.C. Davis Small Farm Program

<http://sfp.ucdavis.edu>

California Small Business Association

<http://www.beginningfarmers.org/farm-business-planning>

U.C. Agriculture and Natural Resources

<http://ucanr.org/sites/placernevadasmallfarms/FarmBusinessPlanning>

USDA National Agricultural Library Rural Information Center:
http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/small_farm_funding.htm

Beginning Farmers
<http://www.beginningfarmers.org/farm-business-planning>

NC State Small Farm Decision-making and Enterprise Planning Workbook
<http://agmarketing.extension.psu.edu/begfrmrs/SmlFrmDecisionMakingWrkbk.pdf>

Natural Resources Management:

Colusa County Resource Conservation District
<http://colusarcd.org>

Colusa County Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
530.458.2931 x112