

Trust across fencelines: A framework for extrafamilial land tenure relationships between non-operator landowners and beginning farmers and ranchers

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Abstract

The future of the United States' food system depends on the agricultural industry's ability to support beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) in their pursuit of stable land tenure. Many BFRs lease or rent land to grow their operations and overcome barriers to land access. Non-operator landowners (NOLs) are an increasingly prevalent landowner audience with potential to form extrafamilial land tenure relationships with BFRs. However, further research is needed to understand how these relationships form and are sustained over time. This qualitative study interprets the lived experiences of BFRs, NOLs, and Land Link coordinators who facilitate extrafamilial land tenure relationships through the lenses of Proximity Theory and Social Exchange Theory to create a framework for trust development. We found trust between NOLs and BFRs in land tenure relationships evolves through three phases. The first phase, prerequisite trust, depends on the clearly established expectations of each party, their baseline motivations, and at least one of the five types of proximity (geographic, social, cognitive, institutional, organizational). The second phase, fragile trust, arises when the NOL and BFR engage in negotiated exchanges with the support of a third-party advisor, such as the Land Link coordinator. The final phase, resilient trust, relies on the continuous reciprocal exchange of time, energy, and resources by the parties involved as they take risks on each other's behalf to create something new. The resulting framework expands the tools available to third-party supporters like Land Link coordinators as they help to steward land tenure relationships. The results of this study can also inform outreach materials to BFRs and NOLs as they pursue relationships with each other and create more opportunities to bring new producers and innovative practices onto the agricultural landscape.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the landowners and new agrarians who shared their stories with me. Thank you for being unafraid of pursuing the paths that determine the future for young people on the land.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Farmers and ranchers in the Great Plains region are confronting a number of complex, interrelated problems threatening continued agricultural viability. These issues include climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable resource conservation, known as the “triple threat challenge” (Calo, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, principal farm operators aged 65 and older outnumber farmers younger than 35 by six to one. The imbalance means older generations are rapidly aging out of agricultural production, a process sometimes referred to as the “Great Wealth Transfer” (Mase et al., 2017; Nadolnyak et al., 2019; Valliant et al., 2024). Between 2011 and 2031, 70 percent of U.S. farmland will change hands (Carolan, 2018). This transition has the potential to intensify concentration and competition for land ownership, availability of credit, and agricultural innovation, as well as exacerbate degradation of rural populations and economies (Adenuga et al., 2021; Nadolnyak et al., 2019).

The United States food system’s capacity to develop innovative, scalable solutions to the triple threat challenge is dependent on the agricultural industry’s support of the next generation of farmers and ranchers (Calo, 2020). Beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) are defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as producers who have ten years or less of farming or ranching experience (USDA NIFA, 2025). BFRs may face substantial financial and social barriers to entering and staying in agriculture, including lack of access to family land, minimal capital to purchase land and develop their business, and exclusion from traditional knowledge transmission from the family farm “succession ladder” (Ackoff et al., 2022; Carolan, 2018, p. 180; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016; Valliant et al., 2020). Many BFRs turn to leasing or renting agricultural land as an alternative to inheriting or purchasing property to grow their operation. As

such, BFRs are part of the two-thirds of all land tenure agreements between extrafamilial tenants and landowners (Katchova & Ahearn, 2016; Valliant et al., 2022).

Land tenure relationships are one avenue by which BFRs can gain power and capital in the transition of wealth from existing operators to new producers. These relationships can take the form of rental or lease agreements between a landowner and a tenant, or the outright transfer of land ownership from one party to another (Calo, 2020). When given access to land via stable, long-term land tenure agreements, BFRs are more likely to adopt production practices that could help to mitigate the effects of the triple threat challenge. Those practices include precision agriculture, new crop varieties, alternative production systems like organic or regenerative agriculture, no-till, cover-cropping, rotational grazing, and riparian remediation (Adenuga et al., 2021; Calo, 2018; Carolan, 2018; Lu et al., 2022; Munden-Dixon et al., 2019; Stevens & Wu, 2022).

A landowner audience with increasingly prevalent potential to form land tenure relationships with BFRs is non-operator landowners (NOLs). Of the 40 percent of rented farmland acreage in the 48 contiguous states, 80 percent of this land is owned by NOLs, making them a critical part of the solution to improving land access for BFRs (Bawa & Callahan, 2021). NOLs are a group encompassing a wide variety of people and circumstances, but for the purpose of this research are defined as landowners who own but are not responsible for the operation or management of their farm or rangeland. They might reside permanently on the land they own or live far away from their property, may have acquired their land as a farmer, via inheritance, or for recreation or investment, and might be an active or former farmer (Petrzelka et al., 2025). NOLs are a heterogeneous group with different needs and motivations and are a relatively new force in agricultural land ownership, so resources and support specifically tailored to their

knowledge base are lacking. This gap makes it challenging for NOLs to know where to access information to make decisions about land management, causing them to potentially shy away from programs or innovations that could be useful in addressing the triple threat challenge (Barnett et al., 2020; Basche & Carter, 2020; Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). There is a discrepancy between NOLs' expressed interest in conservation practices and their actual participation in such programs (Petrzelka et al., 2013; Petrzelka et al., 2012; Petrzelka et al., 2025).

The need among BFRs for land access opportunities and the growing importance of NOLs in agricultural land management create an opportunity to explore the conditions necessary to facilitate innovative land tenure relationships between these two groups. NOLs are often not as dependent on production income from their land as owner-operators, so they may be more resilient to the risks associated with adopting innovative business and management practices, such as forming land tenure relationships with BFRs (Petrzelka et al., 2013; Petrzelka et al., 2020; Sorice, 2018; Valliant et al., 2022). BFRs provided with stable land tenure could help to make conservation practice adoption more accessible for interested NOLs, helping to address the triple threat challenge on landscapes that might otherwise fail to do so (Lu et al. 2022). Fruitful land tenure relationships between these parties have the potential to support the implementation of adaptive practices on landscapes impacted by the triple threat challenge, while ensuring the inclusion of BFRs in the Great Wealth Transfer and securing the future of agricultural production.

Extrafamilial land tenure relationships: Existing support

An estimated 25 percent of ongoing farm transfers between non-relatives indicate a need for programs specific to these types of relationships (Valliant et al., 2020). Some organizational and policy support exists to aid BFRs in their pursuit of land access, particularly in connecting

BFRs with either existing landowners who are seeking tenants for their agricultural properties or retiring producers who lack an heir yet want to pass on their property to a younger, non-related producer. Non-profit organizations, such as the American Farmland Trust and Land For Good, conduct research and provide educational resources, outreach, and technical guidance to BFRs and landowners seeking to enter land tenure relationships (American Farmland Trust, 2025a; Land For Good, 2025). Federal grant awards enshrined in the USDA's Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development Program help to fund targeted sources of support for BFRs, including continuing education and mentorship opportunities (USDA NIFA, 2025).

Land access policy incentives (LAPIs) are the primary form of policy support used to bring BFRs onto the agricultural landscape. The USDA Conservation Reserve Program-Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP), administered at the federal level, offers financial incentives to landowners who sell or rent land enrolled in expiring CRP contracts to a BFR or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher (FSA, 2026). Additionally, a handful of states including Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Kentucky, Ohio, Missouri, and Pennsylvania offer a Beginning Farmer Tax Credit to landowners who select a BFR as their tenant or successor. Maryland, Delaware, and Washington offer similar programs that provide loans to BFRs to support farmland acquisition and protection (Valliant et al., 2024).

Land Link programs are one of the most widespread types of projects aimed at creating land access opportunities for BFRs. These programs arose from grassroots efforts in the 1990s in response to the Farm Crisis of the 1980s and in anticipation of the Great Wealth Transfer from farmers more than 65 years old to a new generation of producers (Valliant et al., 2019). Originally established to facilitate matches between older, retiring producers without a successor and BFRs seeking access to land, Land Link programs today often provide a wide variety of

services including succession planning, online property listings, legal advice, and education and technical assistance (Hersey & Adams, 2017; Valliant et al., 2019). Land Link programs are administered by a variety of institutions, from non-profits to land grant universities and state departments of agriculture.

Despite this strong network of existing strategies to support BFRs as they attempt to overcome financial and social barriers, challenges remain to implementing programming that fully aligns with the needs of BFRs. The educational information and trainings offered by some beginning farmer programs, while valuable for building knowledge among BFRs, fail to address the practical lack of capital resources and accessible land available to this group (Calo, 2018). Land Link program land seekers are often misaligned with landowners in terms of the amount of acreage sought versus offered as well as the availability of on-farm housing. Land seekers typically far outnumber landowners in Land Link program participation (Valliant et al., 2019).

Similarly, while NOLs may utilize Land Link and succession planning programming as they consider the future of their properties, tools targeted specifically to NOLs and their unique experiences are sparse (Petrzelka et al., 2021; Petrzelka et al., 2025; Sawadgo et al., 2021). The lack of resources is worsened by a misunderstanding of landowner's connection with their land, exemplified by the commonly used term "absentee landowner". Absentee implies this group of landowners is neglectful and uninterested in the status and management of their land (Lopez et al., 2024; Petrzelka et al., 2025). However, studies show that some NOLs are "emplaced" and have an emotional connection to their property, which motivates their interest in the land's ecological and agricultural health (Barron et al., 2020). Rather than being disconnected from land management decision-making, NOLs require educational and outreach materials specifically tailored to their motivations and needs, which have yet to be thoroughly examined (Petrzelka &

Armstrong, 2015; Sorice et al., 2018; Valliant et al., 2022). Additionally, there are critical emotional and financial obstacles among landowners engaged in succession planning who consider transferring ownership to an extrafamilial BFR, such as the landowners' dependence on the sale of their property for their retirement income. Further exploration is required to understand if and how these obstacles affect NOLs' willingness to participate in extrafamilial land tenure relationships (Purc-Stephenson et al., 2025; Valliant et al., 2021; J. Valliant, personal communication, February 21, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

There is a need to better understand the conditions and types of support necessary for NOLs and BFRs to form land tenure relationships, foster these relationships, and improve land access outcomes while addressing the triple threat challenge (Arnold et al., 2022; Valliant et al., 2022). Forming land tenure relationships between extrafamilial parties, despite its increasing ubiquity in shifting land tenure patterns in the United States, requires considerable outreach and support of the parties involved to make such a relationship successful (Hersey & Adams, 2017; Valliant et al., 2019). The unique needs of NOLs and BFRs relationship development, how they navigate and conceive of the challenges facing each other, and how trusting, productive relationships are practically built and sustained has yet to be examined.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators to build a framework for trust development between extrafamilial parties in agricultural land tenure relationships. The research questions guiding this study are:

- **RQ1:** What motivates a NOL to form a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and vice versa?

- **RQ2:** What dimensions of proximity support the development of trust between non-related NOLs and BFRs in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ3:** What role does a third-party supporter play in the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ4:** How do negotiated and reciprocal social exchanges influence the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR?
- **RQ5:** What are the barriers to facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, and how are those barriers overcome?
- **RQ6:** What information sources and technical support do NOLs and BFRs use when forming new land tenure relationships?

Significance

The rapidly increasing relevance of extrafamilial land tenure and transfer requires research to reflect the evolution of tools from the family farm model to one that supports extrafamilial parties in building and sustaining trust (Adenuga et al., 2021; Valliant et al., 2022). These relationships also require formal support because of their potential to increase the use of adaptive and conservation practices by BFRs on BFR-managed landscapes (Adenuga et al., 2021; Calo, 2018; Carolan, 2018; Lu et al., 2022; Munden-Dixon et al., 2019; Stevens & Wu, 2022). The results of this study provide a snapshot of the real-world experiences of NOLs and BFRs that can be used to create specific outreach, educational, and support materials targeted to NOLs and third-party supporters seeking to steward innovative land tenure relationships between extrafamilial parties and improve land access for BFRs.

Theoretical Frameworks

In this research, Proximity Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET) are combined to examine how trust develops over time between NOLs and BFRs. The two theories are used in combination because their complementarity better explains the complex process of trust development in agricultural land tenure relationships than each theory would in isolation (Ruth et al., 2018). Proximity Theory was selected because of its previous application to understanding interpersonal dynamics between landlords and tenants of agricultural land beyond spatial proximity alone, to encompass multiple dimensions of trust (Leonhardt, 2024). SET was selected because of its use as a tool to effectively describe how parties in social relationships develop trust temporally as they engage in different types of symbolic and resource-based exchanges (Fischer et al., 2019).

When integrated, Proximity Theory and SET create a framework that reflects phases of trust development in space and time between two extrafamilial parties engaged in a land tenure relationship. The five types of proximity in Proximity Theory are a lens through which we can understand how prerequisite trust might form for two parties due to their alignment in one or more areas of proximity, and how this creates a strong foundation for trust to develop before the relationship is even initiated. SET is then used to build on the foundation of proximal trust by describing the fragile trust and resilient trust phases that result from interdependent exchanges between the parties, further developing the original connection they made through their own proximity (Fischer et al., 2019; Leonhardt, 2024). Each theory is described in further detail in the following sections.

Proximity Theory

Proximity Theory has historically been used in economics to describe "...what brings actors closer, further apart, or separates them and...what conditions their ability to interact and

coordinate with one another” (Zimmerman et al., 2022, p. 53). While initially focused on the physical distances between economic entities and how that distance shapes their ability to relate and innovate, Proximity Theory has more recently been applied using characteristics of social geography that consider types of proximity beyond physically spatial relationships. Boschma (2005) posited these additional types of proximity are social proximity, cognitive proximity, organizational proximity, and institutional proximity. When combined, all five types of proximity can give us a deeper and more holistic understanding of how parties are compelled to interact in webs of relationship. Specifically, this paper builds on the use of Proximity Theory by Leonhardt (2024) to understand relationships between agricultural landowners and their tenants.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Traditionally applied to workplace behavior, SET describes how relationships develop over time as the result of interactions between parties, generating their obligations to one another (Emerson, 1976). SET functions on the premise “that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments” (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875), arisen from the involved parties abiding by certain social rules and norms of exchange. As the parties engage in interdependent exchanges forming interpersonal attachment, different types of exchanges may result in different degrees of trust. Negotiated exchanges that involve binding written agreements are technically less risky but tend to create fragile trust, while reciprocal exchanges are riskier because they depend on the parties’ mutual belief in each other’s goodwill but tend to result in more resilient trust (Molm et al., 2009). In this study, SET is used to interpret how land tenure relationships change over time as they evolve through different stages of an agreement, from a written lease or employment contract to a more emotional bond between the involved parties.

Limitations

The participants in this study were selected purposively using the criterium that they had experienced the process of extrafamilial trust development. This was done with the goal of theory construction rather than population representativeness because of the grounded theory approach used to conduct the research (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because of the use of purposive sampling to select the participants, the results cannot be generalized to all experiences of NOLs and BFRs, though a reader might be able to relate conclusions made here to other research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were internally motivated to respond to an interview request about their experiences and do not necessarily represent all NOLs and BFRs who have engaged in a land tenure relationship, nor those who have yet to pursue this type of relationship. The findings of this study provide insight into the lived experiences of NOLs and BFRs in land tenure relationships (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Assumptions

This research was conducted with two key assumptions in mind. The first assumption was the individuals interviewed for the study fully understood the questions asked of them. The second assumption was the individuals interviewed for the study responded truthfully to those questions.

Definition of Terms

Beginner Farmer or Rancher (BFR) – an individual who has not previously operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for ten consecutive years or less (USDA NIFA, 2025)

Conservation practices – agricultural land management practices that conserve or improve soil, water, and air quality or benefit native species or wildlife habitat, such as conservation tillage, cover cropping, rotational grazing, and riparian remediation (Petrzelka et al., 2020)

Conservation Reserve Program-Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) – a federal program that offers two additional years of rental payments to a landowner who leases or sells property in an expiring CRP contract to a BFR or socially disadvantaged producer (Horst et al., 2024; FSA, 2026)

Extrafamilial – non-relatives. Also referred to as non-related (Valliant et al., 2021)

Land access policy incentives (LAPIs) – government policies that fund and support BFRs to lease or purchase farmland (Valliant et al., 2024)

Land Link coordinator – program leader or individual who manages and administers the work of a land link program (Valliant et al., 2019)

Land Link Program – a service that connects farmers or ranchers without a successor to a farm seeker; may offer legal support for lease development and employment agreements, negotiation of terms, and/or guidance for transfer of ownership of the business, equipment, facilities, or land. Also called farm link (Valliant et al., 2019)

Land tenure – land use relationship in which land is owned by one party and rented by another (Lu et al., 2022)

Non-Operator Landowner (NOL) – a landowner who owns but is not responsible for the operation or management of their farm or rangeland; may be residents who reside permanently on their land or absentee landowners who live away from their land (Petrzelka et al., 2025)

Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter explores the knowledge base necessary to understand the values and motivations BFRs and NOLs might bring to a land tenure relationship. It also contains an overview of existing literature on NOLs' conservation and land transfer behavior, Land Link programming and succession, as well as Proximity Theory and Social Exchange Theory.

Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

The most substantial obstacles identified by BFRs to starting and sustaining an agricultural operation fall into three categories: land access limited by financial barriers, insufficient programmatic and policy support, and a steep social learning curve (Calo, 2018; Carolan, 2018; Horst et al., 2024; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016). Compared to more established or multi-generation producers, BFRs are often younger, more reliant on off-farm income and government payments, run smaller operations, have a higher debt-to-asset ratio, and may be more vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Key & Lyons, 2019; Munden-Dixon et al., 2019). BFRs who rely on government payments to sustain their operations are more likely to leave agriculture sooner, while those with larger asset ownership and higher sales are less likely to do so (Nadolnyak et al., 2019).

First-generation BFRs are less likely to have access to forms of sustaining capital early on in their careers than more established producers and may struggle to gain a foothold in agriculture (Munden-Dixon, 2019; Stevens & Wu, 2022). Traditional modes of financial assistance, such as loans through the USDA's Farm Service Agency or federal crop insurance, can be essential to the survival of a BFR's business (Dodson & Ahrendsen, 2016; Key, 2022). Yet these funding sources may be out of reach to large numbers of BFRs because of prohibitive eligibility criteria (Jablonski et al., 2022). In light of these challenges, BFRs may be more open to alternative modes of production. Some BFRs choose to operate in diverse, local, and higher-

margin market channels that can be supplemented with government funding and network programming (Thilmany et al., 2021). For example, a BFR may participate in direct-to-consumer production while engaging in community-supported agriculture and food hubs. To avoid taking on large financial risk while increasing their resilience to volatile market changes, BFRs may lease or rent land (Bauman et al., 2022; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016; Stevens & Wu, 2022; Valliant et al., 2022). When BFRs can establish long-term, stable forms of land tenure that limit debt accumulation and efficiently utilize credit, they are more willing to take on the risks associated with adopting innovative production practices than established producers who own their entire operation (Stevens & Wu, 2022).

Chapter One provided an overview of existing policies and programs intended to aid BFRs with land access and financial support, but these programs may inadequately address the complex external obstacles BFRs face (Carlisle et al., 2019; Travlos, 2019). Current programming aimed at BFRs in the United States focuses more on developing the knowledge and skills of individuals, rather than addressing systemic financial barriers to finding and purchasing land that could be improved by widespread, concrete policy changes (Calo, 2018). Programs like the federal CRP-TIP program require far more financial risk for the BFR than the landowner. Federal programming must do more to de-risk the process for participating BFRs (Horst et al., 2024). Additionally, these federal programs are often geared toward more established commodity crop producers and might fail to meet the needs of BFRs who are pursuing smaller, more diverse, and more localized forms of production (Carolan, 2018).

BFRs face a steep social learning curve as new entrants to production agriculture. This reality is especially true for those who are first-generation producers without preexisting agricultural backgrounds. A concerted effort must be made by the BFR to build knowledge

outside of traditional channels otherwise facilitated by the multigenerational family farm. BFRs are disadvantaged by their exclusion from the “succession ladder”, or the staged learning process multigenerational producers inherently go through when working on the family farm throughout their life. Instead, BFRs must find alternative avenues to build knowledge and social capital in an agricultural community in such a way that helps them to develop relationships with, and learn from, more experienced farmers (Carolan, 2018; Eggerman, 2023). BFRs may be more interested than established producers in peer-to-peer learning networks and informal gatherings for knowledge transmission (Carolan, 2018; Seng et al., 2020). The heterogeneity of BFRs as a broad demographic group poses a challenge to the creation of educational programming that fully addresses the needs and knowledge gaps of BFRs (Jablonski et al., 2022; Munden-Dixon et al., 2018).

BFRs’ transcendence of the succession ladder also has the potential advantage of infusing new perspectives and forms of knowledge into the agricultural landscape. While more work needs to be done to improve outreach offered by existing educational programs to BFRs, young ranchers may be more open to accessing nontraditional informational resources and testing out alternative practices that could be key to addressing the triple threat challenge (Munden-Dixon et al., 2018). BFRs seeking access to land through Land Link programming were found to be more interested in implementing innovative farming and conservation practices on their operations compared to established farmers (Valliant et al., 2020). Similarly, BFRs in the Midwestern region are more likely than established farmers to engage with innovative adaptation strategies such as livestock integration and crop diversification (Mase et al., 2017). These findings indicate that BFRs could bring enhanced knowledge practice diversification to the agricultural industry.

Non-Operator Landowners and Conservation Behavior

Published research on NOLs is limited. Multi-state data on NOLs have been collected four times: from the Agricultural Economic Land Ownership Surveys in 1988 and 1999, the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land Survey in 2014, and the American Farmland Trust NOL Survey (AFT) conducted between 2018 and 2020 (Petrzelka et al., 2021). Any additional understanding we have about NOLs' land management behavior comes from literature focused on their propensity to adopt conservation practices on their properties (Barnett et al., 2020; Petrzelka et al., 2025; Petrzelka et al., 2011; Petrzelka et al., 2013; O'Brien et al., 2021; Ranjan et al., 2019). For the purposes of this research, I will explore the available information on NOLs' conservation behaviors to identify gaps in our knowledge that must be filled to form land tenure relationships between NOLs and BFRs.

The AFT NOL Survey represents the most recent comprehensive data on NOLs in the United States and was conducted in 13 states: Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington (Petrzelka et al., 2020). In each state, 750 male and 750 female landowners who own 25 acres or more of farmland were surveyed, and data were reported on a state-by-state level. The range of average ages represented among the NOLs surveyed was 65 to 73 years old. Landowner respondents who indicated residence on their land ranged from 17 percent to 69 percent, and if they resided away from their land, distance between their residence and their land ranged from three miles to 152 miles away.

The respondents to the AFT NOL Survey were asked who they intend the next owner of their land to be. While most respondents indicated they plan to keep their land in the family (59 percent or more), an average of 16 percent of landowners indicated they are unsure who will assume ownership of their land. Thirteen percent of respondents intend the next owner to be

“someone they trust” and nine percent intend the next owner to be “someone unrelated”. These statistics demonstrate potential for at least some NOLs to be a target audience of alternative land tenure pathways such as matching with BFRs who are unrelated to them, and how important sense of trust is in a landowner’s decision-making process.

The most important sources of information for 75 percent of AFT NOL respondent landowners was their farm operator or lessee. Of the types of informational interventions presented to them, 33 percent of respondents were most interested in materials that were developed specifically for NOLs. Finally, when asked about potential barriers to adoption of conservation practices on their land, NOLs reported low concern about how it might impact their social reputation among neighbors or their operator’s lack of knowledge about conservation practices. Social norms and inadequate operator training may therefore not play a large role in influencing a NOL’s decision to adopt certain conservation practices (Petrzelka et al., 2020).

Overcoming engagement barriers to involve NOLs in solutions to the triple threat challenge will only become increasingly important as the amount of non-operator-owned agricultural land grows. Negative associations have been identified between degrees of absenteeism and rent rates, land values, and local economic health (Bawa & Callahan, 2021). Barriers to conservation practice adoption among NOLs vary widely but tend to fall into three broad categories: lack of trust and shared values with tenants; insufficient policy and economic incentives; and misguided or inadequate access to informational resources (Basche & Carter, 2021; Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Petrzelka et al., 2013; Sawadgo et al., 2021).

As early as 2005, in a study that collected data from both landowners and tenants about their propensity to adopt “conventional” versus “sustainable” agricultural practices, both parties recognized engaging in self-censorship with each other about wanting to change practices used

to manage the land. Tenants pointed to cash-rent, the dominant form of lease agreement, as detrimental to the development of landowner/tenant trust because such agreements are most often renewed annually and do not provide security for the tenant. The typically limited timeframe of cash-rent lease agreements are also not conducive to the longer timescales often needed to implement and see the benefits of conservation practices. Therefore, developing strong landowner trust in the tenant and transparency in the relationship are especially important when the benefits of time and investment in certain practices may not be immediately evident to the landowner (Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Ranjan et al., 2019).

Collaborative conservation planning between landowners and tenants is most successful when each party respectfully considers the values of the other and when they share a vision or ethic for the future of the operation. Shared vision and values create a strong basis for trust in the landowner/tenant relationship and might help the parties to overcome hesitancy to discuss management or practice changes (Basche & Carter, 2021). On a practical level, landowners and their tenants must also navigate the complex power dynamics that arise in land tenure relationships, shaping communication and division of decision-making. For example, a tenant may feel the landowner has financial power over them, making them hesitant to pursue or suggest adopting a new practice. Alternatively, the landowner may feel like their tenant has a greater degree of agricultural knowledge and experience, deterring them from communicating openly. A 2022 study of female NOLs found these power dynamics are not clear cut and are individually nuanced, which must be accounted for when developing educational materials and experiences for NOLs (Fairchild & Petrzalka, 2022).

Beyond the relational nature of land tenure relationships, NOLs and their tenants would be more likely to implement conservation practices if more financial incentives were provided

through government programming, such as cost-share opportunities and tax breaks (Carolan, 2005; Mase et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). NOLs' participation in existing programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program may increase with land acreage and the landowner's education level. However, landowners may generally lack awareness of these programs due to the absence of language specific to the NOL audience (Petrzelka et al., 2012). A NOL's distance from their land may diminish their social and economic awareness of the community and geographic context of their property. Therefore, they may not know what kinds of programs might be most relevant to them, emphasizing the importance of targeted outreach materials to increase their engagement (Petrzelka et al., 2013). In terms of how this behavior might impact a tenant, while secure land tenure for tenants is a predictor of a producer's intention to adopt a conservation practice, actual adoption is less likely because costs can be prohibitive and are not feasible for tenants operating with a year-to-year lease (Lu et al., 2022).

Gaps in NOLs' knowledge and technical understanding of conservation practices and how to implement them poses a barrier to the adoption of such practices on NOL-owned land (Barnett et al., 2020; Basche & Carter, 2021; Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). While likelihood of actual adoption increases with a landowner's propensity to seek and use information, many landowners are not sure where to seek out information and guidance regarding conservation practices in the first place or are misinformed by the resources they turn to (Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). NOLs rely most heavily on friends, family, and their tenants to inform their land management choices. "Intermediaries" like government agency personnel and extension staff may occasionally serve as trusted informants (Petrzelka et al., 2020; Petrzelka & Armstrong, 2015; Ranjan et al., 2024). These findings

suggest NOLs would be more interested in conservation practices if they were better informed about available resources. When educational materials and outreach programs specific to NOLs were provided as part of a study, response and participation were overwhelming (Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022; Petrzela et al., 2013). Certain cultural ideas may also need to be overcome to fill NOLs' knowledge gaps. Depending on their background, NOLs may think of farm profitability and conservation as mutually exclusive, which may act as a potential source of cognitive dissonance for landowners who do not personally have agricultural experience themselves (Basche & Carter, 2021).

Gender may play an important role in how non-operator landowners make decisions, interact with their tenants, and conceive of their relationship to their land (Barnett et al., 2020; Basche & Carter, 2021; Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022; Petrzela et al., 2021). Thirty-seven percent of NOLs are women, and they may rent their land to an operator at a higher rate than male NOLs (Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022). Surveys of female NOLs have found some may feel less comfortable than their male counterparts with making decisions about land use and management and instead defer to their tenants to make those decisions. This discomfort is especially apparent when the NOL does not have any personal on-farm knowledge or experience, which may inhibit her ability to transparently share her expectations and interests when working with her tenant to set goals (Barnett et al., 2020; Petrzela et al., 2021).

Land Link Programming and Succession

A handful of studies have evaluated the role and impact of Land Link programs and primarily focus on using interviews with the coordinators of these programs to analyze their successes and limitations (Hersey & Adams, 2017; Valliant et al., 2019; Valliant et al., 2020). An early review of Land Link programming used Contribution Analysis to evaluate the success of such programs within the broader context of external factors. Hersey and Adams (2017)

identified the financial, emotional, and technical obstacles to landowner and land-seeker participation in Land Link programs. Potential matches can fail due to the amount of money a landowner wants for their operation and the ability of a land-seeker to pay it. The parties may also struggle to overcome emotional challenges around transitioning land to someone non-related. Finally, the preference among landowners to receive information via their social network rather than sources such as the internet, which land-seekers are more likely to rely upon, can make it difficult for landowners to utilize online services and listings many Land Link programs rely on. Land Link programs might be more successful if they incorporated more opportunities to better understand landowners' personal circumstances, expectations, and emotions surrounding succession and to tailor their services to these findings (Hersey & Adams, 2017).

Succession planning is critical to land transfer between extrafamilial parties and relates to increased prevalence of conservation and soil health practices on the agricultural landscape. When farmers create a succession plan and form a trusting relationship with their successor, they are more inclined to make long-term management decisions that align with environmental sustainability and business longevity that can directly benefit the successor. Familiarity and trust between the landowner and the land-seeker can also improve the speed and success with which the land-seeker moves through the knowledge development succession ladder (Hersey & Adams, 2017).

A review of Land Link programs in 12 Midwestern and Great Plains states focused specifically on the limitations of programs themselves (Valliant et al., 2019). Land Link coordinators identified staffing shortages and absence of sustained government funding as the two primary obstacles to the success of their work. These coordinators argued fulfilling these needs would allow for Land Link programs to more effectively manage individual matching

relationships, conduct targeted outreach with older farmers and landowners who are often far outnumbered by farm seekers in Land Link program participation, and monitor and evaluate outcomes in a timely and productive manner. This study spoke to the importance of coalition-building between Land Link coordinators and other agricultural professionals, such as extension agents and farm advisors, to successfully deliver the breadth of services offered through their programs. The study also identified a broader need for more agricultural professionals to be trained in the nuances of succession and extrafamilial land transfers.

Proximity Theory and Social Exchange Theory

Proximity Theory arose as an economic framework to describe “...what brings actors closer, further apart, or separates them” and “...what conditions them to interact and coordinate with one another” in financial transactions between firms (Leonhardt, 2024, p. 2). Historically limited to considerations of physical proximity, 20th century scholars expanded considerations of proximity beyond the geographic transmission of money and business to also describe the flow of knowledge and ideas. In addition to geographic proximity, there are four other types of proximity that can act as substitutes for geographic proximity when physical distance is not as prevalent: social proximity (shared networks and interpersonal bonds); cognitive proximity (shared knowledge and skills), organizational proximity (participation in the same arrangement), and institutional proximity (shared norms and values) (Boschma, 2005). The five dimensions of proximity broadly shape the ability of people in an economic or social relationship to innovate and gain new knowledge, making the dimensions a useful tool to apply to land tenure relationships.

Boschma (2005) explored the benefits and the drawbacks of abundance or scarcity within each proximal dimension. Social proximity is defined as “socially embedded relations between agents at the micro-level. Relations between actors are socially embedded when they involve

trust based on friendship, kinship, and experience [...] Trust-based social relationships facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge which is, by nature, much more difficult to communicate and to trade through markets” (Boschma, 2005, p. 66). Social proximity acts as a prerequisite for interactive learning because it does not depend solely on market dynamics. Too much social proximity can hinder innovation because relationships are based too deeply on emotional bonds of friendship and kinship and restrict actors into established ways of doing things at the expense of their learning capacity (Boschma, 2005).

Cognitive proximity between parties is created when “...[one party’s] cognitive base is close enough to the new knowledge [of the other party] in order to communicate, understand and process it successfully” (Boschma, 2005, p. 63). Cognitive proximity is essential because it ensures those involved share the same foundational knowledge and can interactively learn from each other as a result. Yet if the parties are too close in cognitive proximity, there may not be enough space and flexibility for innovation, new ideas, and breaking norms (Boschma, 2005).

Similarly, organizational proximity supports knowledge exchange because it “depends on a capacity to coordinate the exchange of complementary pieces of knowledge owned by a variety of actors within and between organizations” (Boschma, 2005, p. 65). Organizational proximity can stabilize the relationships between parties because clear roles and structure create a vehicle for different degrees and types of knowledge to be exchanged. However, too much organizational proximity can immobilize people within their set roles and make it difficult for the parties to transcend an echo chamber of ideas (Boschma, 2005).

Finally, institutional proximity is defined as “sets of common habits, routines, established practices, rules, or laws that regulate the relations and interactions between individuals and groups [...] Institutions function as ‘glue’ for collective action because they reduce uncertainty

and lower transaction costs” (Boschma, 2005, p. 68). Formal institutions in this form of proximity are laws and rules, while informal institutions are cultural norms and habits. Institutional proximity creates shared trust that allows information to be transmitted more easily via cultural commonalities, but excessive rigidity in that proximity is too strict for new experiments that could give rise to innovation.

Social, cognitive, institutional, and organizational proximal dimensions compensate for potential lack of geographic proximity in land tenure relationships between NOLs and BFRs (Leonhardt, 2024). Different degrees of each proximal dimension can shape the landowner and tenant’s ability to communicate, make decisions together, develop a shared vision for the future of the land, and navigate power dynamics. All these elements are essential to trust development between the involved parties, particularly when they are not spatially close. For example, close social proximity in which the landowner shares a social network with their tenant in the community surrounding their land may matter more to the development of a trusting relationship than geographic proximity. Close cognitive proximity between the landowner and tenant represents a shared knowledge base between the two parties, as when both share a similar degree of knowledge about a certain agricultural practice. Institutional proximity encompasses shared values, norms, and habits, as when the parties have trained or participated in an intensive financial planning program like Ranching for Profit. Finally, organizational proximity arises when the parties are part of the same organizational arrangement, such as serving on a board of directors together (Leonhardt, 2024).

The degree of each type of proximity may also be detrimental to the landowner and tenant’s ability to adopt innovative practices and ideas in response to the triple-threat challenge. Social proximity embedded in kinship ties may prevent a landowner from taking risks or

adopting new practices because of their concern about negative community opinion or “rocking the boat” (Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022). Excessive cognitive or institutional proximity could create an echo chamber that limits a landowner and tenant to norms or established practices, while close organizational proximity can create hierarchies that reinforce harmful power dynamics (Boschma, 2005; Leonhardt, 2024). Yet some degree of proximity between a landowner and tenant in a land tenure relationship is essential for the development of trust (Leonhardt, 2024).

In contexts like cooperative conservation management among private forest landowners, shared proximities can explain how trust development is initiated, and Social Exchange Theory can explain how that trust strengthens over time as landowners continue to work together (Fischer et al., 2019). Landowners were part of a pre-existing social network (social proximity), were aligned in the high value they placed on the ecosystem services provided by the forest around them (institutional proximity), and owned land in the same area but did not live there full time (organizational proximity). These shared proximities allowed the landowners to take initial steps to work together. Successful cooperative groups continued to engage in reciprocal exchanges of resources, an essential tenet of SET, to sustain practices across their communities. In this case social, institutional, and organizational proximity all helped landowners to choose to cooperate with each other, and then that choice was sustained and elaborated on by both transactional and more emotional exchanges of time and resources, suggesting that this result may apply to other groups of landowners as well (Fischer et al., 2019).

Whereas Proximity Theory can help us to understand some of the precursory characteristics of a relationship that lay the groundwork for trust, SET provides a framework for us to understand how these relationships evolve beyond that point. SET originated in the mid-

20th century as a sociological framework applied to exchanges in a wide variety of organizational contexts (Ahmad et al., 2023). It has been described as “a family of conceptual models” (Cropanzano et al., 2017, p. 1) that share a handful of defining characteristics: social life is framed as a series of sequential transactions between two or more parties; resources are exchanged reciprocally; the quality of the exchange is shaped by the relationship between the parties; and social exchanges involve greater flexibility and trust than economic exchanges.

Each exchange consists of one actor initiating treatment toward a target individual, the target individual responding attitudinally and behaviorally to the first actor, and then a positive or negative relationship forming between them. In the workplace, where SET has traditionally been applied, this looks like a coworker or supervisor treating the target individual positively (e.g. providing support on a work project) or negatively (e.g. workplace bullying). The target individual responds reciprocally to that treatment with their own behaviors or actions (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Over time, positive interdependent social exchanges build on each other to create interpersonal attachment. There is the potential to develop an economic or transactional relationship into a trusting, more emotionally dependable social relationship between the involved parties. By contrast, negative interdependent social exchanges degrade attachment and trust, causing the relationship to remain purely transactional or to dissolve altogether (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Generally, a social exchange can be sorted into these two phases – economic and transactional (negotiated) and emotionally dependable (reciprocated) – which result in different types of trust (Molm et al., 2009). Negotiated exchanges, which include binding written agreements or rules governing how the parties act toward each other, tend to result in more fragile trust. The negotiated guidelines ensure one actor will not exploit the other but does not

necessarily provide them with opportunities to trust each person will act in the other's best interest outside of legal bounds or in unexpected circumstances. Fragile trust forms when the parties can predict each other's behavior in a risky context and can lead to the dissolution of a relationship when those expectations or agreements are violated (Molm et al., 2009).

In contrast, reciprocal exchanges occur when the parties are in situations where they could choose to exploit each other but instead react indifferently or to benefit the other person. Reciprocal exchanges result in resilient trust between the parties where mutual belief in each other's goodwill, interpersonal care, and respect allow the relationship to survive occasional violations of expected behavior. Over time, reciprocal exchanges and resilient trust form the underpinnings of a long-term relationship with accumulated social capital (Molm et al., 2009).

Some trust may be precipitated situationally prior to a negotiated or reciprocal exchange when the parties have previously interacted with each other socially or know the other party to be reputable. This indicates that a degree of social proximity between parties may help to facilitate a longer-term, more trusting relationship (Molm et al., 2009). The private forest landowners mentioned earlier in this section followed this pattern of relational evolution and demonstrated the potential of Proximity Theory and SET to converge in their explanations of how trust develops in time and space. In this context, social proximity catalyzed some landowners' interest in cooperating at all and opened them up to pursuing negotiated and reciprocal exchanges that strengthened their trust and allowed them to work toward common goals (Fischer et al., 2019).

Summary of the Literature

Existing programming intended to help beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) confront systemic obstacles to entering and staying in agriculture, while demonstrating potential, insufficiently addresses land access barriers (Calo, 2018; Carlisle et al., 2019; Travlos, 2019). Simultaneously, BFRs are more likely to bring agricultural practices onto the landscape that

could help to address the triple threat challenge (Mase et al., 2017; Munden-Dixon et al., 2019; Valliant et al., 2020). As the number of NOLs responsible for agricultural land increases, there is potential for land tenure partnerships between BFRs and NOLs, particularly those who have expressed interest in seeing innovative conservation or regenerative practices implemented on their properties (Bawa & Callahan, 2021; Petrzalka et al., 2013; Sorice, 2018; Valliant et al., 2022). However, little is known about what factors must be realized for these land tenure relationships to form, including how landowners overcome emotional barriers to extrafamilial land transition, how BFRs and NOLs demonstrate commitment and readiness to each other, and how trust develops in extrafamilial land tenure relationships (Arnold et al., 2022; Valliant et al., 2022). Interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Proximity Theory and SET, the experiences of Land Link coordinators, BFRs, and NOLs can provide us with insight into how extrafamilial land tenure relationships succeed in the real world.

Chapter Three – Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology used to conduct this study, including design, interviewee demographics, and data collection and analysis. The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators to build a framework for trust development between extrafamilial parties in agricultural land tenure relationships. The research questions guiding this study are:

- **RQ1:** What motivates a NOL to form a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and vice versa?
- **RQ2:** What dimensions of proximity support the development of trust between non-related NOLs and BFRs in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ3:** What role does a third-party supporter play in the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ4:** How do negotiated and reciprocal social exchanges influence the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR?
- **RQ5:** What are the barriers to facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, and how are those barriers overcome?
- **RQ6:** What information sources and technical support do NOLs and BFRs use when forming new land tenure relationships?

Subjectivity Statement

I am interested in this research topic because of my own experiences as a beginning farmer and rancher confronting challenges with land access. I grew up in an urban environment with little to no exposure to agriculture and have spent my adulthood gathering agricultural experience and knowledge outside of the traditional succession ladder. Many people in my

community are also first-generation beginning farmers and ranchers who have used a variety of strategies and relationships to access land for their operations, including leasing from non-operator landowners. I have personally benefited from being allowed to raise pigs on the property of a landowner near me.

Much of my background is in regenerative or sustainable agriculture. I have previously worked on ranches managed using rotational grazing and principles of Holistic Management; I spent three years helping to conduct research at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas on perennial agriculture, soil health, and the broader adoption of perennial grain crops. In my role at the time of this writing, I manage a farmers market where I work closely with many small farms and ranches who prioritize low-input, ecological production systems that enhance soil health and who market their products primarily direct-to-consumer. I therefore have an interest in research that will help more agricultural producers and landowners to implement these practices on our landscapes.

My positionality may have biased my sample of interview subjects toward those who practice regenerative or sustainable agriculture, especially because my use of snowball sampling in some cases drew from my own social networks. My personal experiences as a BFR may have allowed me to gain trust and credibility more quickly with my interview subjects, yet my lack of experience with conventional agriculture may have inhibited my ability to interpret the experiences shared of conventional NOLs and Land Link coordinators who primarily serve conventional producers with complete accuracy. I may be more inclined to share the success stories of NOLs who have formed relationships with BFRs who have transitioned their land from conventional to regenerative management because of my vested interest in such practices. It is

important to note that only one individual interviewed as part of this project owns land that continues to be managed using conventional methods.

Research Design

This research was conducted qualitatively to deeply explore the process of trust development in extrafamilial land tenure relationships, which encompass many variables that are difficult to measure, and to gather data through the stories and experiences shared by research participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2016). The qualitative approach used for this study was grounded theory because this research aimed to result in a theoretical explanation of a process, rather than the meaning of an individual phenomenon, a group of narratives about land tenure, an ethnography of a culture-sharing group, or a series of bounded case studies (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the process of interest was trust development within the specific context of agricultural land tenure between NOLs and BFRs. Grounded theory generates theories or explanations from the procurement of data from participants who have experienced the process of interest themselves, rather than using existing theories to form testable hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014). The grounded theory approach may be used when theoretical frameworks of interest exist but have not been previously applied to the process being studied. In this case, Proximity Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET) were integrated and used to abductively explore and help explain the process of trust development in land tenure relationships between NOLs and BFRs (Creswell, 2013; Kovács & Spens, 2005).

Constructing a grounded theory requires the researcher to conduct the data collection and analysis processes simultaneously, and to iteratively compare newly gathered data with emergent ideas about the developing theory. The researcher uses memos to track ideas about the theory as they arise during data collection. Purposive sampling is used to select research participants,

meaning their selection is driven by the criterium that they have experienced the process of interest at the center of the emerging theory (Creswell, 2013; Morgan, 2020). The data analysis process follows three steps: the data is abductively open coded by the researcher for major ideas; axial coding is used to identify themes and smaller categories around these ideas; and selective coding explores patterns and connections between these categories that become the “storyline” explaining the process of interest. These three steps are conducted for each individual interview, and then interviews are compared to each other within groups, between groups, at the level of isolated pairs (if participants are paired), and between pairs (Boeijie, 2002; Kovács & Spens, 2005; Reichertz, 2010).

Semi-structured interviews are a fitting method for data collection in a grounded theory study because they are both “...open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 28). Interviews allow the participant to share their interpretation of their personal experience of the process of interest with a depth that would not occur conversationally or in a traditional social context. The semi-structured format focuses questions on the process of interest while remaining open-ended enough for unexpected stories and responses to emerge. Because of the emergent nature of grounded theory research and the continual “conversation” between the data collection and analysis processes, interview questions may be refined over time to better understand the developing theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Interview Instruments

Three interview instruments were created to gather data from each group of interest: Land Link coordinators, NOLs, and BFRs. The first instrument was written for the Land Link coordinator interviews with the goal of identifying and understanding the steps of the trust development process from a third-party supporter perspective. See Appendix C for the Land

Link coordinator instrument. The questions were open-ended to prompt the interviewees to share stories and anecdotes about their experiences yet retained enough structure to maintain focus on the process of interest (Charmaz, 2014). The interview questions aimed to gather context about each individual Land Link program and its operation and then narrowed in on the coordinator's experiences stewarding trusting land tenure relationships between extrafamilial parties.

Additional questions examined challenges to forming trusting extrafamilial land tenure relationships, including what forces or situations cause trust to degrade, break, or not form altogether. Land Link coordinators were also asked about what tools or support are needed to support extrafamilial parties forming trusting land tenure relationships. The structure of the instrument moved from general questions about Land Link programming, to the specific process of trust, and back to more reflective general questions to end the interview on a more conversational level (Charmaz, 2014).

The NOL and BFR interview instruments were used to further explore the steps of the trust development process and see if the emerging theory held true for the experiences of NOLs and BFRs in the real world (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013). NOL participants were asked about the history of their agricultural land, their motivations and challenges as a NOL, their relationship with their operator and their perspectives on trust, and useful resources for forming extrafamilial land tenure relationships. BFR participants were asked about their history as an agricultural producer, their current operation, their relationship with their landowner and perspectives on trust, and similar questions about resources. See Appendices E and F for NOL and BFR interview instruments.

Data Collection

In the first phase of this study, Land Link coordinators were interviewed because of their deep experience, through their programming, with forming land tenure relationships between extrafamilial parties (Carolan, 2018; Hersey & Adams, 2017; Valliant et al., 2020; Valliant et al., 2019). Interviewees were selected purposively with the goal of theory construction, rather than population representativeness, and based on the criterium that they were the individual primarily responsible for managing their Land Link program (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendices A and B), potential subjects were contacted via email using information provided on a list of Land Link programs from the American Farmland Trust Farm Link Finder (AFT FIC, 2025). Interviews were conducted between November 2024 and July 2025 and occurred virtually because most participants lived out of state from the researcher. Participant consent was acquired at the beginning of each recorded interview, and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Though additional interviewees could have been recruited, saturation was reached at 11 interviews when new interviews no longer revealed novel themes and instead reinforced emerging patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The results of the interviews with Land Link coordinators informed the instruments used to interview NOLs and BFRs in the second phase. Similarly, NOL and BFR interviewees were selected purposively with the goal of theory construction, rather than population representativeness, and based on the criterium that they were a NOL who had formed a land tenure relationship with a BFR or vice versa (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). NOL and BFR interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling, by which the Land Link coordinators who were interviewed were asked to recommend pairs of NOLs and BFRs they had worked with through their program. Some of these interviewees also recommended interview subjects they

knew who might fit these criteria, and some interviewees were recruited through the researcher's own networks.

Snowball sampling was used in addition to purposive sampling because NOLs are a hard-to-reach population who often must be accessed via widespread paper surveys. High-level demographic data that is available on NOLs does not specify whether their operator is a BFR (Lopez et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2019; Sorice et al., 2018). Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to incorporate this level of specificity. Additionally, because this study used a grounded theory approach with the goal of exploring a particular process, the sample did not have to be statistically random or the results to be generalizable to other populations, therefore snowball sampling was an acceptable method (Creswell, 2013; Parker et al., 2019).

Following Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix D), interviews with 7 NOLs and 8 BFRs were conducted virtually and in-person between October 2025 and March 2026. Participant consent was acquired at the beginning of each interview, and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Interviewee Demographics

During the first phase of research, 11 Land Link coordinators were interviewed. Ten interviewees were the current coordinators of their programs; one interviewee was a former coordinator who was still involved in the organization as an advisor. Table 3.1 shows the demographics of the Land Link coordinators who were interviewed, including their gender, geographic region, and the type of organization administering the program. Generally, land grant university Land Link programs in this study were found to serve audiences of larger-scale landowners using conventional management practices, while non-profit Land Link programs

primarily worked with smaller-scale producers interested in alternative practices. However, nuances did exist across the program spectrum in audiences served.

Table 3. 1

Land Link Coordinator Demographics

ID	Gender	Region	Organization
LLA	Female	Midwest	Land Grant University
LLB	Female	Midwest	Land Grant University
LLC	Female	West	Non-Profit
LLD	Male	Midwest	Non-Profit
LLE	Female	Northeast	Non-Profit
LLF	Male	Midwest	State Department of Agriculture
LLG	Male	Southeast	Land Grant University
LLH	Female	West	Non-Profit
LLI	Male	West	Land Grant University
LLJ	Male	Southeast	Non-Profit
LLK	Female	West	County Conservation District

Eight BFRs were interviewed in the second phase of research. Table 3.2 shows demographic information for the eight BFR interviewees.

Table 3. 2

BFR Interviewee Demographics

ID	Gender	Region	Operation	Time Working with Landowner
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BFR1	Male	Midwest	Beef cattle	Five years
BFR2	Male	Midwest	Beef cattle and forages	Ten years
BFR3	Male	West	Small scale grains and legumes	Two years
BFR4	Male	Midwest	Row crops	Ten years
BFR5	Male	Midwest	Sheep	Three years
BFR6	Male	Midwest	Beef cattle	Four years
BFR7	Male	Midwest	Beef cattle	Six years
BFR8	Female	South	Beef cattle	Three years

Seven NOLs were interviewed in the second phase of research. NOL3 ran an active agriculture operation on part of her property, while two NOLs (NOL5 and NOL6) were former primary operators of their properties. NOL7 was in the process of transitioning management to a younger operator. NOL1 and NOL2 had prior agricultural experience from growing up on their land. NOL4 had no prior agricultural experience. Table 3.3 depicts additional demographic information about NOL interviewees.

Table 3. 3

NOL Interviewee Demographics

ID	Gender	Region	Amount of Land Owned	Distance of Residence from Land
NOL1	Female	Midwest	1,800 acres	50-100 miles
NOL2	Female	Midwest	220 acres	Onsite
NOL3	Female	West	5 acres	Onsite
NOL4	Female	Midwest	40 acres	100-150 miles
NOL5	Female	Midwest	194 acres	Onsite
NOL6	Male	Midwest	7,100	Onsite

NOL7	Male	West	14,646	Onsite
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Four NOLs and four BFRs were interviewed who are currently or were recently in land tenure relationships with each other (BFR2 and NOL2, BFR3 and NOL3, BFR4 and NOL4, BFR5 and NOL5). All other NOLs and BFRs were interviewed without a corresponding interview with their operator or landowner counterpart. This was due to a variety of reasons, including difficulty reaching the potential interviewee or refusal to participate by the interviewee. All paired interviews occurred separately except for the interview of NOL2 and BFR2, who were interviewed together.

The interviewees represented a variety of different types of land tenure agreements. For BFR1, ownership of the land and beef cattle business had fully transitioned from his landowner to himself with assistance from his area Land Link program. Their transition process lasted for approximately a year from their initial meeting to the purchase of the land and business from the landowner, during which time the parties spent time working together and refining their transition agreement.

NOL1 inherited the agricultural land that she grew up on and leases most of her land to a young BFR who is the son of a former tenant. He leases both pastureland and cropland from her under cash rent agreements. She receives significant financial and legal support from farm management services through her bank.

NOL2 was raised on her property and inherited it from her parents. She and BFR2 have been friends for over a decade and consider themselves family. Their business relationship began when he purchased his first group of cattle from her, and he now runs cows on some of her land as well as helps to manage her property and leases with other tenants. BFR2 is passionate about

regenerative management practices and identifying other tenants who will help implement those practices on NOL2's agricultural land, despite it not being popular in their area.

NOL3 purchased her property in 2009 with the goal of starting her own small livestock operation as a beginning producer herself and has since continued to raise meat goats and pastured poultry on a portion of the land while leasing out the other part to another producer. She has hosted a variety of tenants, including BFR3, and connected with many of them initially through her local Land Link program. The lease agreements NOL3 has with her tenants are year-to-year. BFR3 leased from NOL3 for two seasons before expanding his operation on the property of a different landowner. He is a former lawyer who now grows grains and legumes on a small-scale and sells them wholesale and direct-to-consumer.

NOL4 did not grow up in agriculture and sought out alternatives to traditional 401K retirement investments due to her concern about her money supporting environmentally detrimental industries. BFR4 was raised farming with his father and spent the first several years of his career working in commodity grain marketing but lacked the capital to purchase farmland for his own operation. NOL4 and BFR4 initially connected when they were on the board of a non-profit organization dedicated to training farmers in sustainable agriculture practices. NOL4 and BFR4's agreement involves NOL4's self-directed individual retirement account (IRA), with a gradual ownership transition to BFR4. NOL4 rolled her 401K into a self-directed IRA that was used to purchase the parcel of land that BFR4 leases. Every five years a certain percentage of land ownership is transferred to BFR4, and the lease payments he makes apply to his ultimate purchase of the land, scheduled for 2041.

NOL5 inherited the land from her parents, transitioned to organic, and farmed it herself until the 2020s, when she started leasing to tenants. BFR5 and his family became interested in

homesteading and started their burgeoning hair sheep herd, which he manages outside of his full-time job and hopes to eventually turn into his primary source of income. NOL5 and BFR5 connected through mutual friends when BFR5 was interested in expanding his sheep operation, and NOL5 was seeking someone to help manage a noxious weed problem on part of her property.

NOL6 is a fourth-generation cattle rancher who spent years of his career engaged in ranch management programming and training. As he considered the future of his ranch, he opted to separate the management enterprise from land ownership; the land ownership company leases land to the management enterprise. His children, though passionate about the land, chose to pursue other careers. NOL6 leveraged his networks to identify a potential successor, and the two entered a transition agreement through which the successor will soon fully own the management enterprise, while NOL6 continues to own the land. Their transition process was navigated with significant input from a third-party supporter, who is a licensed psychologist and counselor.

BFR6 did not grow up ranching but became interested in cattle as a land management tool during his time as a wildland firefighter. He worked as an apprentice on a regenerative cattle ranch before the opportunity arose to be closer to his family and manage the property of a NOL. The landowner was friends with BFR6's parents and learned about his interest in ranching and land management through them. They operate under a verbal employment agreement by which BFR6 is paid a base salary, receives access to housing on the property, and builds equity in the form of adding a few head of cattle to his own herd each year.

BFR7 leases land from 11 different landowners, primarily non-operators, to run his cow-calf business. His primary lease is with a landowner who reached out to him through the bank

when she was interested in finding a new tenant more aligned with her values and the practices she wanted to see on the land.

NOL7 and his wife purchased their ranch in the 1970s. While he still runs much of the day-to-day management of the ranch, he and his family were in the process of identifying a young rancher to succeed him as manager at the time of our interview. He has also hosted and trained several apprentices over the last decades.

BFR8 and her husband lease land from her husband's extended family that they use to run their custom grazing operation, as well as manage a neighboring ranch for a non-operating family. Neither of them was raised ranching and they participated in apprenticeship programs before proposing a management plan to their extended family.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by either the lead researcher or using the Rev transcription software. Participants' names were removed from the transcripts and assigned an identification code (LLA, LLB, LLC, etc. for Land Link coordinators and NOL1, NOL2, BFR1, BFR2, etc. for NOLs and BFRs). Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in each phase of the research as part of the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2013; Charmaz, 2014). Data analysis was iterative and constant comparative, modeled after methods outlined in Boeije (2002) and Merriam (2009).

As each individual interview was conducted, the transcript was abductively open coded by hand by the lead researcher for relevant ideas, including key themes from Proximity Theory and SET, allowing specific examples of theoretical concepts to emerge (Kovács & Spens, 2005; Reichertz, 2010). Each interview was compared first with the other interviews within the same group to identify repeated codes (e.g. a Land Link coordinator to other coordinators), which were

then related to form categories via axial coding. Axial codes were solidified into categories when either two-thirds or more of the participants in each interview group mentioned some direct variation of the code, or when a code mentioned in one interview explained an aspect of another interviewee's experience in a separate interview (Charmaz, 2014; Hennink et al., 2022). These two steps were replicated each time a new interview was conducted for each interview group (Land Link coordinators, NOLs, and BFRs). Once interviews had been coded and compared within groups, they were compared with interviews from other groups to enrich the categories. For example, did what one Land Link coordinator have to say about the importance of work ethic to trust hold true for a NOL and/or a BFR? Additionally, because some paired NOLs and BFRs were interviewed for this project, their coded interviews were compared with each other and then to other NOL/BFR pairs to gain a fuller picture of how some themes arose in relationship. The final phase of selective coding connected all the categories and organized them into a "storyline" describing the process of trust development (Boeijie, 2002). This storyline serves as the basis of the context-dependent, substantive level framework that resulted from the data examining the process of trust development between extrafamilial parties in land tenure relationships. The framework was organized into a visual representation for further refinement and presentation (Creswell, 2013).

Research Rigor

Several different methods were used to ensure the credibility, confirmability, reliability, and transferability of this qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved using deep and prolonged engagement with the data, by which I established rapport with the interviewees and was able to elicit rich, detailed responses to questions about their experiences. Analytical memos were used to document the emergence of

the grounded theory over the course of the research process and provided a forum for me to maintain reflexivity notes to bracket my own experience and perceptions out of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Cope, 2014).

To achieve confirmability, interviews were conducted with Land Link coordinators, NOLs and BFRs for data triangulation among the multiple sources (Boeijie, 2002; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Periodic debriefings between myself and a faculty advisor about the data and the use of participant quotes to support emergent themes ensured findings were derived directly from the data (Cope, 2014). Reliability was attained by providing a detailed account of the study's purpose, participants, methods, and analysis and the use of the same interview instruments consistently across participant types. Additionally, though the codes I used evolved over the course of each phase of the research process, the same codes were consistently used across all interviews in the final phase of data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, data transferability was reached by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participants (Ahmed, 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Additional measures were also taken to validate the use of the grounded theory approach, including the study of the process of trust development; a coding methodology that emerged from the data to create the theory; the presentation of the theory in a visual model; and a narrative thread to connect the codes (Creswell, 2013; Rice & Kitchel, 2017). The results of this research are not generalizable to subjects beyond those under this study, though a reader might be able to relate conclusions made here to other research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter Four – Results

The results presented in this chapter are from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators and are shared in the order of the six research questions.

RQ1: What motivates a NOL to form a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and vice versa?

NOL interviewees were asked about their motivations for retaining ownership of their land, what considerations they make for the future of their property, what led them to seek a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and any concerns they had entering a land tenure relationship with a BFR. Conversely, BFR interviewees were asked about their motivations to become a farmer or rancher, significant barriers to starting and maintaining their business, what interested them about forming a land tenure relationship with a NOL and if they had any prior experience doing so, and any concerns they had entering a land tenure relationship with a NOL. The primary motivation for NOL participants is a BFR's *credibility*. The primary motivations for BFR participants are *necessity* and *the openness of NOLs to think outside the box*.

Credibility

According to the Land Link coordinators, NOLs, and BFRs in this study, a NOL's confidence in the BFR's credibility as a hard worker and land manager motivates them to initiate a land tenure relationship. LLG described work ethic as a "common denominator" underpinning the start of successful land tenure relationships made through his program. He said, "The biggest thing to me is if the young farmer is working hard and the landowner can see that, it builds so much trust. If the landowner sees that young person is willing to put in the time and the effort, that can bridge a lot of gaps."

According to our participants, credibility is distinct from passion. Although a BFR may be excited and passionate about their future in agriculture, credibility demonstrates to a NOL that a BFR will take proper care of their land and business. For this reason, credibility goes beyond how the BFR presents themselves on paper to how they prove themselves in day-to-day work, as described by BFR1:

They [the NOL] want them [the BFR] to have credibility, and credibility and passion are not the same thing. You've got to prove that you can manage and be willing to work hard and be able to take risks. You've got to demonstrate your ability to be an executive.

One common way a BFR can develop a credible reputation in their network and broader community is by running even a small, successful agricultural operation, though they may not have a specific NOL or another landowner in mind to work with. Therefore, when the opportunity arises for such a relationship, that BFR may be a desirable candidate for a landowner within their network. This strategy allowed BFR7 to form connections with and build up his reputation among many of the NOLs he works with now:

You have to have the relationship with the individual before a door ever opens. We started on a fairly small tract of family land and just tried to take really good care of it...which creates opportunity for networking and relationship building.

Real-world credibility can also be proven when a NOL and BFR spend time collaborating before formalizing their relationship, either as neighbors or in a trial period. Even when NOL5's intention was not yet to lease to BFR5, she shared about how he went above and beyond to work in exchange for grazing his sheep on part of her property, "He did that for three years, paying no rent, just in exchange for working, doing some odd jobs for me because I was alone on the property. It was saving me spraying costs, dealing with the field, a lot of mowing."

A BFR's credibility encourages a NOL to feel secure in taking risks on their behalf when another option might appear safer. NOL2 spent so many years witnessing BFR2 develop his knowledge of regenerative agriculture and build up his business acumen that she said, "I'm willing to let him [take risks], because I've seen what he can do. I believe in what he says because he's gone to schools, he's talked to ranchers from all over the area, other states, and knows what problems they have."

Based on the interviews with our participants, a BFR demonstrates their credibility by building skills beyond their resume and working hard for the opportunities available to them early in their career. When a BFR is willing to put in the effort even when their opportunities are minimal, as when they are first starting out, proves to a NOL they could be a capable collaborator in land management. Whether a NOL becomes familiar with a BFR through a working relationship with them or through their reputation in the social network, their credibility motivates the NOL to consider them for a land tenure relationship because they see the potential for them to effectively manage their property.

Necessity

BFRs are motivated to form land tenure relationships with NOLs out of a sense of necessity. Five of the eight BFRs interviewed mentioned access to land and capital as barriers to starting and sustaining their agricultural operation and have pursued extrafamilial land tenure relationships as a way to overcome some of those barriers. BFR5, who became interested in sheep grazing partially because of the lower land area requirement compared to cattle, said, "My biggest challenge is land access... We're right in the middle of a lot of big conventional farmers, so any land that's available gets snatched up pretty quick." He described the opportunity to work

with NOL5 as the first time he and his family were able to seriously consider scaling their operation.

For BFR6, managing land for a NOL represented the need to seize an opportunity that he might not have otherwise had to build his own business and practice what he learned through apprenticeships. The arrangement also expanded his ownership, enhancing personal and financial security, as he described:

What attracted me to this [working with a NOL] was being near my family, but the other thing was the opportunity to try to run things on my own. Also, the addition of equity as part of the pay...Having some sort of ownership in my own cattle herd or something like that over time, so that I'm not just working for someone else, I'm also working for myself.

A land tenure relationship with a NOL may also help to meet the financial needs of a BFR by functioning as a job. BFR8 and her husband, who manage ranchland both for his extended family and for the NOLs of a neighboring property, rely on the extrafamilial management position as a critical source of income for supporting their family and business. BFR8 described how connecting with a NOL fulfilled a need for stable income to root and grow their business:

I feel like it was more out of necessity a little bit. We needed to make some money to live here, so we really worked on creating that relationship with the landowners to try to become the managers so that we could have an income to live off, and so our own business could grow.

For a BFR, a land tenure relationship with a NOL may help to meet a need that takes many forms: access to land to scale their operation, an arrangement to develop skills and build equity, or even a source of income to support their fledgling business. Depending on the

arrangement, these alternatives provide a foundation for the BFR's own operation without having to take on significant financial debt or risk for the opportunity to manage land. While every land tenure relationship between a NOL and a BFR is unique, according to our participants, BFRs are motivated by these needs and benefits to pursue land tenure relationships with NOLs over other types of arrangements.

Openness of NOLs to think outside the box

Some BFRs in this study were motivated to form land tenure relationships with NOLs because they believe NOLs are more inclined to “think outside the box” (BFR7) about management practices on their agricultural land than other landowners in their area. BFR7 uses a grazing management style uncommon in his region. He explained this grazing style has given his ranching business an advantage when pursuing land tenure opportunities with NOLs:

People that aren't from inside of your box, like the county that you live in, think outside of the box easier because they're not in the box with you. The absentee landowners generally are more open-minded to consider applying prescribed fire, or they'll listen to ideas about getting water development in place so we can do more creative things with our grazing management.

BFR4, who entered an innovative self-directed individual retirement account agreement with NOL4, views NOLs as an untapped resource who may be interested in sustainable agriculture but do not know a young farmer or rancher to manage their property because of where they live or their individual context:

There are thousands of people in the area where [NOL4] lives that share her belief [in organic farming] and have resources and assets, but they don't know a farmer. I think it

really takes getting out of your own tunnel. [NOL4] and I both peeked our heads outside of our tunnels and found each other.

NOLs may have access to capital for adopting certain practices that a BFR does not and may be willing to prioritize tenants who implement those practices. NOL2, whose family has had many tenants over the years managing their farm, opted to transition leasing to BFR2 and other tenants who want to manage for soil health outcomes. BFR2 said of NOL2, “You had to have that capital and I don’t, right? But [NOL2] does. And she’s like, ‘What better way could I invest in than into somebody that wants to improve my soil health?’”

For a similar reason, BFRs may perceive NOLs as more resilient to pitfalls and potential failures associated with attempting to adopt innovative practices. Not only does this create a greater sense of material safety for the BFR, but it also allows space for them to learn from mistakes without losing their entire business, depending on the type of land tenure agreement they have. This safety aspect was described by BFR6, who is employed by his NOL as a ranch manager:

The consequences of my mistakes are less likely to shut the operation down because cash flow is the key to everything. I have more room for mistakes that I wouldn't have somewhere else. In this business, you learn the most by messing up and dealing with the consequences. It’s not always best for the business, but I think it is for me as a manager and someone that is so new to agriculture.

To BFRs who are interested in unconventional land management practices, the fact that a NOL who may live outside of their community, may access different information, and may have resources to put toward goals like soil health may be more appealing than a land tenure relationship with a local landowner who is not as open to these types of practices. Not only does

this allow the BFR to develop their unique business and management style and diversify the practices seen in an area, but it also creates a degree of shared interest and vision between the BFR and the NOL, motivating them to form a land tenure relationship.

RQ2: What dimensions of proximity support the development of trust between NOLs and BFRs in a land tenure relationship?

Land Link coordinators were asked about shared characteristics of successful relationships made in their programs. NOLs and BFRs were both asked how they initially connected with their operator or landowner, respectively, what considerations were important to them, and how their relationship has developed over time. The interviews with coordinators, NOLs, and BFRs revealed two themes: *the dominant strength of a shared social network and geographic area*, and *compensation by shared values creating shared vision*.

Shared social network and geographic area

This study found a shared social network and/or geographic area connecting the NOL and BFR through other people or a physical community helps to form strong trust. Geographical closeness naturally creates an environment for a NOL to witness the BFR's credibility and hard work in real life. LLA described how this context puts certain land tenure relationships at an advantage over others:

All the ones that have matched have seen their land seeker work for them or for someone near them and have truly seen their work ethic in real life [...] That's hard because a traditional land link would potentially be someone you had never even seen before, and then it would be hard to establish that trust.

A geographic area, especially in rural communities, may give rise to a shared social network between the NOL and the BFR. Social ties create shared experiences for the involved parties, forming the foundation of their relationship. Discussing her current BFR tenant, NOL1

talked about how years of relationship between their families in the same town had formed a trusting connection: “It was that youngest man’s grandfather that my father had worked with as a teenager in custom harvesting. We went to church together. We worked together. We went to school together. You know them really well when you do that much together.”

A shared social network may also occur separately from a geographic area. Even when the NOL and the BFR do not physically know each other, their reputation through mutual connections can act as a form of social capital and increase potential openness to work together. BFR6 mentioned the role social reputation played in his decision-making process:

When I mentioned to my grandpa that I was considering working for [the landowner], my grandpa – who was a guy whose opinion I would take very seriously – said, “Well, I’ve never heard anyone ever say anything bad about working for [the landowner]. Just a really high character, standout kind of guy,” which I’ve found to be true.

As described by our participants, the importance of a shared social network and/or geographic area to the initial connection between a NOL and BFR indicates social and geographic proximity are the two strongest dimensions of proximity that support the trust development process. Social and/or geographic proximities create shared experiences for the NOL and BFR and familiarize them with the other person’s strengths and social reputation, which motivates them to pursue a land tenure relationship. These proximities also form a critical degree of early trust by exposing one party to how the other behaves and responds to situations in real life, giving each an idea of how they might act in relationship to one another.

Shared values create shared vision

In interviewees’ experience, when a NOL and BFR did not have a social network and/or geographic area in common, the shared values of the two parties had to be strong enough to

compensate and cohere into their shared vision. Values may result from a common interest the NOL and BFR share, such as similar passion for an agricultural practice. LLC told the story of a landowner who struggled for years to find an operator until she connected with someone who, like her, had a background in permaculture. Their common interests were then able to inform their collaborative plan for the future of the land:

The person that ended up being the best match for this situation was more of a landscaper who [...] specializes in transitioning land to regenerative agriculture using permaculture design principles. This ended up being exactly the kind of thing this landowner wanted to see on her land [...] Their relationship, because they were so aligned in terms of vision, just ended up being a really good fit.

Similar interest in practices creates a common knowledge base from which the NOL and BFR can develop their relationship. NOL6, who placed great importance on training in Holistic Management principles when considering who his successor might be, felt an immediate connection with his BFR operator because "...I already knew he was very familiar with holistic grazing practices, so that was a big hurdle. I wasn't going to try to teach anybody because you either get that or you don't, and he is passionate about it."

A NOL and BFR may identify shared values between them when they are in a context that brings those values to the forefront. When NOL4 and BFR4 served on the board of the same regenerative agriculture nonprofit together, they were linked by their belief in the organization's mission, as well as the opportunity to see how the other person lived their values while carrying out the work of the board. As NOL4 put it:

I already had an established relationship with [BFR4], although it was kind of minimal. I only knew him from the meetings, but I had already developed a respect for him and his

points of view and his knowledge. I had a lot of confidence in him, respect, and an amount of trust.

BFR4 echoed this mutual feeling when he said,

We had several years of experience serving on a nonprofit board together. We had seen and witnessed each other's character when handling other people's finances, so I think that made it easier to see and hear the way we each reacted and voted on conflicts or stresses within that nonprofit organization. We knew who each other were as people.

The overlap of NOL4 and BFR4's values brought them together enough to coalesce into their unique shared vision for their land tenure relationship. Both were passionate about seeing more sustainable agriculture on the landscape in their state, and BFR4 recognized NOL4's interest in investing her retirement savings in this vision in a more tangible way. NOL4 – because she had seen BFR4's credibility at work on the board and knew they saw eye to eye about farming practices – felt the degree of trust needed to initiate their relationship.

NOL4 and BFR4 were able to create a successful relationship in part because of the common language that allowed them to communicate their values to each other. NOL5, because of her prior experience farming her own land, has found her understanding of agricultural practices has also helped her to relate more effectively to her tenants: “What really contributes to trust is being able to speak their language and knowing I've been out there myself – hand digging, repairing equipment, hand weeding. Those really hard tasks.”

When this shared language does not exist, it creates an obstacle that can cause a potential relationship to break down from the outset. LLG spoke about a BFR he met through his Land Link program who he thought might be a good fit for a conventional legacy farm facing a

transition. When the BFR reached out to the landowner, he used prohibitive jargon that put the landowner off the potential opportunity almost immediately. LLG described the situation as:

We knew we were kind of looking for somebody that could talk the same language that a landowner talks in terms of conventional farming. [The BFR] used terms like “agroecology” and “regenerative”, not that there's nothing wrong with that, but with these landowners, it didn't click. You almost need a cultural translator sometimes to bridge the gap between folks.

When a NOL and a BFR lack shared language and norms, it inhibits their ability to recognize each other's values, identify where they share commonalities, and envision their collaboration.

Shared values and consequently, vision, between a NOL and a BFR must be strong enough to compensate in situations where the parties do not share a social network or geographic area. Cognitive, institutional, and to a lesser degree, organizational proximities organically encourage shared values to arise and allow NOLs and BFRs to safely take their land tenure relationship to the next step when social and geographic proximity are not at play. While social and geographic proximities have the strongest role in supporting trust development, the other three proximities can compensate when the parties consider starting and stewarding their relationship.

RQ3: What role does a third-party supporter play in the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR in a land tenure relationship?

Land Link coordinators were asked about what their involvement in relationship facilitation looked like over time and how their programs define and measure success. NOLs and BFRs were asked about the processes of connecting and developing their land tenure relationships, including how they created their lease or employment agreements, and were often

probed about individuals or resources that supported those processes. Third-party supporters may be the Land Link coordinator, a lawyer, a farm manager from a bank, a professional facilitator, or even a neighbor. Third-party supporters serve two major purposes in land tenure relationship facilitation: *empowering with information* and *creating a sense of safety*.

Empowering with information

Land Link coordinator interviewees acknowledged the array of complex technical questions and hurdles involved when forming a land tenure relationship and viewed their primary responsibility as empowering NOLs and BFRs with information to navigate these questions. LLD described how he approaches land tenure relationships with the consideration that neither party may know what to ask or how to proceed independently through other opportunities in the future: “The sense of empowerment is important for us. If we can build their skills and experience, hopefully that will enable them to be successful.”

Empowerment takes different forms. A third-party may assist with answering questions about assets, business planning, and other technical wrinkles that must be ironed out for a land tenure relationship to be successful. LLA described how they help NOLs answer complex questions in concrete ways:

My role is to ground-truth some things like, “Oh, I can’t just sell all my equipment to this employee because I have a huge tax burden, so how do I handle that? But I don’t really want to go into a business with a person I’m not related to, so how do I work through that?”

A third-party supporter can also assist with pursuing a land tenure opportunity for a BFR while they focus on other things like building their business, and act as an advocate for them with their best interests in mind. BFR3 reflected on how the coordinator at his local Land Link

office took on some of the labor of finding a match and helped him to discern the right fit for his operation: “There were a few things available that didn’t seem right. So I was able to keep doing what I was doing until she got in touch with me when something came up. I’m glad she did because she connected me with [NOL3].”

Developing lease agreements can seem like an especially daunting task for parties entering a land tenure relationship. A third-party supporter can personalize and clarify this process for the people involved. LLI described using facilitation services to bring interested parties together to determine what kind of lease model will work for them:

I’ll take about a dozen different kinds of common land lease agreement components, explain what they actually mean, trying to get them away from this thought that there’s a right and a wrong way to do it. Almost every time they’re relieved when I start to explain all the different ways to structure it and how to take a lease agreement and be creative with it...They’re able to have that conversation confidently without being timid to talk about it.

A third-party supporter can also support a NOL through difficult aspects of a transition when the NOL is not physically present near their land or feels they may lack the skills and information necessary to make changes to their existing land tenure agreement. NOL1 experienced a situation where she felt her tenant was mismanaging the land and relied on her farm manager through the bank to help her work through changing tenants. She said, “I wanted them out of there. I managed, but when the conflict began, that’s when the bank became involved.” In this case, the farm manager gathered and shared information with NOL1 that helped her to make an informed decision about her operator.

Forming and stewarding a land tenure relationship between extrafamilial parties brings up legal and technical complexities that require expert input. Particularly for a BFR, who may be looking for land for the first time, and for a NOL, who may have minimal experience with changing a land tenure situation or may not be physically present for all negotiations, the support of a third party can empower them with the information they need to collaborate and carry their relationship into the future. As time goes on, and the NOL and BFR can successfully navigate technical questions together, the third party may find themselves playing less of a role in the relationship. LLB explained why and how this role evolves over time:

I don't want to be the crutch that they build their relationship on [...] For the most part, we're really putting the responsibility on them to create their relationships because it's really their job to know whether or not this will work.

Creating a sense of safety

Third-party supporters also help to *create a sense of safety* for NOLs and BFRs to be honest and form a trusting relationship. LLB encompassed this when she said, "My job is facilitating opportunity to make sure that it's a safe environment for both parties as they move forward."

In the process of creating a sense of safety, the third-party supporter can help NOLs and BFRs to deeply consider what they want from the land tenure relationship and clarify their expectations. Reflecting on his experience as an older landowner struggling to let go of control of his ranch, NOL6 said,

I am openly telling anybody my age, "I doubt you can get there without a third-party facilitator". I would've messed this up without somebody quietly saying, what do you

really want? And getting me to step away from whatever discomfort I was experiencing because of what happened that day to always look at the larger picture.

Especially as a NOL and BFR work through the early stages of their relationship and begin to understand their expectations and shared vision, the third party can use their neutral status to help work through conflicts that could otherwise damage or destroy the burgeoning land tenure relationship. NOL6 went on to say, "...When something felt unsafe, we would typically wait until the facilitator was here, and that way we could bring it up in a safe environment rather than blow up in the moment."

In some cases, a third-party supporter with a personal relationship to the BFR and the NOL can contribute to the development of trust. BFR8 talked about the role a neighbor played who had worked closely with their landowner for many years:

[The landowners] paid their neighbor to do everything, and then when my husband came along, the neighbor started paying him. They did that for two years. Finally, the family is comfortable enough for the neighbor to step back and be a consultant, and my husband can do everything else. The neighbor has been extremely helpful for the transition because the family trusts him and he's on the ground working with my husband every day, so he can help communicate to the family.

In this situation, the credibility of the neighbor to the landowners and the time he has spent working with BFR8 and her husband created a mediating sense of safety that allowed a new, trusting relationship to flourish.

Forming a land tenure agreement requires vulnerability and authenticity from the NOL and BFR, as well as an environment to put their skills and information into practice. The third-party supporter can help foster this environment by acting as an advocate for each individual

party and for their relationship as a whole. Before the NOL and BFR launch into sustaining their relationship themselves, the third party can ask and answer the tough questions that form enough trust to get the relationship to a jumping off point.

RQ4: How do negotiated and reciprocal social exchanges influence the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR?

Land Link coordinators were asked about their involvement in relationship facilitation and about successful and unsuccessful relationships to learn more about the role of legal agreements and how they evolve into longer-term, trusting relationships. NOLs and BFRs were each questioned about their lease agreements and the process of creating them, and additional questions about how their relationship has developed over time, how they define trust, and where they are in their trust building process. Participants described legal agreements as a way for NOLs and BFRs to *demonstrate their dedication to each other* and *articulate their expectations*. Once these safeguards are in place, the parties can increase trust in each other as they *go above and beyond* and *take risks to create something new*.

Demonstrating dedication to each other

Based on the relationships in this study, the legal agreement between NOLs and BFRs may be a written lease, an employment arrangement, or some other form of document that outlines the details of the relationship. LLB viewed the creation of the legal agreement as an opportunity for landowners and BFRs to signal their commitment and trust to each other:

You're showing that you're both willing to invest in an attorney to at least write this component out. If someone balks at this first step, which is legal protection, then we're not going to get to step 1,000, which is some sort of transfer.

Without some form of agreement guiding their relationship, the BFR and NOL may find it difficult to trust each other and accomplish their shared goals for the landscape. BFR5 talked

about the challenges he experienced when he and his landowner did not yet have a lease agreement in place. BFR5 felt some reluctance to invest time, energy, and money into the relationship when the opportunity could have been taken away and returns on those investments were not guaranteed. BFR5 described that uncertainty when he said:

It's still a handshake deal...which is always in the back of my mind...If I for sure have the place, then I'm going to put in a little bit more infrastructure as far as fencing, but I probably won't tackle any of that until we do have something on paper. There was a bunch of work I was going to do this winter, but I haven't because I don't want to put in too much.

A legal agreement commits both parties to the guidelines that dictate how they work together, which creates a sense of trust that the NOL will not exploit the BFR and vice versa and are characteristics of negotiated exchange. In the case of BFR5 and NOL5, the creation of their lease signaled BFR5's commitment to achieving NOL5's management goals, and NOL5's commitment to allowing BFR5 to lease the land and grow his business. Because the BFR and NOL are given the opportunity to do right by each other under the specific, contractual set of circumstances that make up their land tenure relationship, fragile trust forms.

A legal agreement elaborates on the sense of safety created with the third-party supporter by providing both the landowner and BFR with the assurance that they are committed to one another and their collaboration, with legal solutions and guidelines to fall back on should conflict arise. LLA said, "My hope would be that because we're putting in contracts and protections, that helps the land seeker trust their part, and the more the land seeker trusts in that landowner, the more they're willing to give and go above and beyond because they feel safe."

Articulating expectations

Legal agreements are also an opportunity for NOLs and BFRs to articulate their expectations of their relationship and vision in a shared document. LLG referred to the lease as, “A legal document, but also a communication tool, that you can use to talk through some of the things that might trip folks up and make sure everybody’s on the same page at the beginning.”

BFR1 recognized the highly emotional nature of land transition from experiences watching his own family go through the succession planning process. He viewed the conversations around the transition agreement with his landowner as an opportunity to better understand what the landowner was looking for from the relationship, even if it took time to lay everything out:

Turning over your land is like turning over your heart, your soul. Nobody turns that over without expectations. You need to take the time to develop a trust-based relationship with them and find out what their expectations are. And I'm not saying you have to find this out in the first meeting, but within a few weeks or months at least, you want to have a pretty good sense of what those expectations are and that this person is honest.

Clearly writing out the terms and conditions of a land tenure relationship in a legal agreement leaves nothing to chance or interpretation if the NOL and the BFR encounter challenges working together. The process of creating this agreement also allows the involved parties to reflect on their own needs and interests and to share them with the other person as they arise. NOL4, discussing the importance of a lease agreement to her relationship, said,

You think that if you trust each other, you don't really need a written agreement. Well, I don't think that's true. It's a written agreement that establishes that trust. You cannot assume that the other person is agreeing with you. Even if they nod their head, you have to say, do you agree with this written statement? That's where you establish trust – where

everything is completely transparent. We didn't leave anything up to the other's imagination.

A written lease or employment agreement may represent a departure for some landowners who have historically only had verbal leases, or own land in communities where verbal leases are more common. BFR2 discussed why he and NOL2 opted for a written lease instead of the verbal agreement that is traditional to their surrounding area:

Everything around here is a verbal agreement. So the first thing we did was hire a lawyer. Let's get things written, because when it's in black and white, everything's a hell of a lot easier... versus in verbal agreements, because if it's verbal, things can get skewed. But if it's black and white, you signed it, I signed it – there is no argument. A third party can look at that and say, right. Exactly.

Establishing expectations through a legal agreement creates a negotiated exchange that allows the NOL and BFR to predict how the other will behave when conflict arises, and how they plan to conduct themselves to remedy conflicts and achieve the goals of their relationship. These terms act as a contractual safeguard against wrongdoing while providing clarity as to each party's needs and responsibilities in their collaboration. Using the legal agreement to detail each party's expectations ensures they have a foundation to continually come back to when a decision or outcome are in question, and a tool to remediate and move forward, rather than a source of confusion that causes trust to break down.

Going above and beyond

Once the legal agreement is in place and the NOL and BFR actively develop trust within its terms, interviewees described how the sense of growing trust allowed NOLs and BFRs to *go above and beyond* for each other. *Going above and beyond* consists of abiding by the terms of

the legal agreement, and taking extra steps to steward the land, business, and the interpersonal connection between the NOL and the BFR. When asked how he defines trust, BFR3 explained that trust develops when the BFR shows up at the property and completes necessary work by doing things like closing gates, turning water off, and generally caring for the provided resources. He added:

There's the physical action component and there's the verbal component. Following through on what you say, doing what you say you're going to do helps develop trust. Also, showing up whether you said you're going to do something or not and doing more than what people are expecting you're going to do. You're not just tunnel vision focused on your own thing but want to help [the landowner] do other things as well, like help get weeds under control, or help fix a broken fence.

Opportunities to *go above and beyond* occur not only in the day-to-day management tasks of the BFR but may also emerge in times of crisis or conflict. The willingness of the BFR to *go above and beyond* and make good managerial decisions is especially essential when the NOL is not physically present near their property or is unavailable to provide an opinion. Recalling recent natural disasters that have impacted her land, NOL1 noted, “[Trust] is extremely crucial because [my tenant] has to make decisions. Four years ago, we got an 11-inch rain, and it did more damage in an hour or two than I have seen for years. But he's the one who's there, and he's got to make all the decisions.” The fact that her tenant made choices under duress that she approved of only deepened NOL1's trust in the BFR managing her property.

Not only does *going above and beyond* strengthen the fragile trust between a NOL and a BFR, but it can help to repair trust when it has been degraded by a challenge or a conflict. NOL5 and BFR5 both shared in their interviews about navigating difficulties around noxious weed

management, which is a land management priority for NOL5. When the two engaged in conversations about prioritizing weed management and their land tenure arrangement, NOL5 recommended BFR5 consider taking a business planning course for beginning farmers and was impressed when he immediately took her suggestion and enrolled. NOL5 said of that experience,

He jumped right in and took that course. And that was a really big [step] for me [toward trust] ...I was really impressed by his efforts to really, truly do this. The fact that he really enjoys it, it's not a chore, means a lot to me.

By taking tangible steps to demonstrate his respect for NOL5's opinion, BFR5 helped to remediate some of the trust that had been lost when her weed management goals were not being met. NOL5 reciprocated this action by opting to formalize their agreement in a written lease – demonstrating that the development of trust does not always happen in a linear fashion. “I realized there were times when I wasn't really fulfilling what I said I was going to do,” NOL5 said.

Going above and beyond runs both ways for the NOL and the BFR, so each person can trust the other will do right by them and the land. Over time, consistent positive action by both parties can help to improve communication and move the relationship forward. LLK said of trust:

For a farmer, it's trusting that irrigation's not going to be turned off, that somebody's not going to cut or run over your hoses, that if your animals somehow escape you're at least going to get a phone call if not help rounding them up. By the same token, the landowner feels that their property is not going to be degraded, that the soil is going to be okay, that their infrastructure is going to be respected and treated well... [The BFR] may not

necessarily become part of your family and be there for every meal, but you feel like you've seen them often enough that something comes up, you can talk about it.

Acting beyond the bare minimum necessary to meet the terms of the legal agreement represents the evolution of the land tenure relationship from the negotiated exchange phase into the reciprocal exchange phase. By *going above and beyond*, NOLs and BFRs repeatedly engage in positive behaviors toward each other in situations where they could react indifferently or negatively, creating a deeper sense of trust. These behaviors compound on one another to make the relationship more resilient to breaches of trust that inevitably occur.

Taking risks to create something new

This study found long-term, trusting relationships can develop between NOLs and BFRs when they transcend the terms of their legal agreement by *taking risks to create something new*. The sense of safety and clarity supported by the legal agreement gradually allows the NOL and BFR to feel comfortable enough to change the way they do things. Most often, the risk is taken by the NOL to shift more managerial and decision-making power into the hands of the BFR.

LLF said:

Both parties must be open and understand there's going to be some things that must be done a certain way up to a certain line in the sand. When that comfort level increases with both parties, then we can start talking about changing some things up, doing some of the things that maybe the next generation has learned from experience on a farm or what they learned in school.

The risks taken by a NOL and a BFR can be successful when they are mutually beneficial to both parties. BFR7, who implements grazing practices that may be perceived as risky by people in his area, aimed to consider mutual benefit in every land tenure relationship he pursued.

He recognized a landowner inherently takes a risk by giving him a chance to manage their land instead of retaining a long-time tenant or placing land into the Conservation Reserve Program.

He said:

I like to manage land and to find opportunities that are mutually beneficial for the landowner and the tenant where we can align our goals. I try to provide opportunity for that landowner to generate some income off land that might be sitting idle and gives us the opportunity to steward a chunk of grass and help move it in a positive direction and build our business... We create relationships where both parties are filling a void for the other party.

Risks can take different forms. A NOL may allot financial resources to a BFR's continued education to support their implementation of certain practices. When a BFR follows through on these opportunities, rather than simply brushing them off or failing to engage altogether, it signals to the NOL that the BFR values the risks they take on their behalf and deepens the trust between them. BFR2, in assisting NOL2 to pursue additional tenants for her property aligned with their soil health goals and regenerative vision, said,

If you know you want to focus on soil health, maybe you pay for a tenant to go to a soil health event and pay for the soil test. You're willing to say, "If you want to go learn, we'll front the tab on it for you to get educated." If a guy isn't willing to learn and you're trying to focus on something, then that's a major decision for you.

Another type of risk is increasing the stake of financial ownership by the BFR. These incentives demonstrate to the BFR that the NOL is genuinely willing and interested in the success of the BFR's business and operation, even if it means the NOL surrenders some amount of control. For example, NOL6 spent time working with his operator over a period of years and

became so impressed with the operator's work that he began to pay him with membership interest in the management company in addition to a salary. Eventually, upon entering into a buyout agreement together through which the operator would gain full ownership of the management company, NOL6 saw their relationship noticeably shift when the operator was given more decision-making and managerial power:

I will tell you that the minute that blue ink was on the paper, our relationship changed very radically. Once [the operator] had that ownership, he was doing what he wanted to do. There wasn't that sense of, "Is this old man really going to let go? I wonder if he's really going to do it."

Taking the risk to drastically change the structure of his business marked a significant departure in NOL6's perspective on his receding role and his operator's increasing role in the management of the ranch. By demonstrating his tremendous trust in his operator to successfully run the grazing business in a way that felt aligned with their vision and values, NOL6 was able to transform his land tenure and succession process into something entirely new.

When a risk does not pay off as the NOL and BFR expected and results in unanticipated consequences for the land or business, it may cause trust to degrade. BFR6 reflected on how a challenging year for calving caused his landowner's trust in him to waver, and for the landowner to take back some of the managerial decision-making power.

Ultimately, he said, "We've learned from it and we're going to move on and grow from it." But I could see that his trust in me broke down a little bit. That's where he took some of the reins back and said, "I know you manage things, but under your management things didn't really go so great, so now I'm going to make some decisions."

In this situation, though the risk the landowner took allowing BFR6 to completely manage the calving process did not play out as expected, the strong sense of trust they had already established allowed their relationship to weather the challenges and evolve forward. If that trust does not exist, it mitigates the ability of the NOL and BFR to ever move beyond the legal boundaries of their negotiated exchange.

Taking risks to create something new transforms a strictly legal relationship dependent on a negotiated exchange into an opportunity for a NOL and BFR to engage in reciprocal exchanges of time and energy that carry more emotional weight. As a NOL takes risks on the BFR's behalf, and the BFR responds with equal or positive action, layers of trust build upon one another to result in a more resilient relationship. This may look like a NOL transitioning more managerial or financial power to the BFR and seeing the land responsibly and effectively stewarded in return, or a NOL paying for a BFR's continuing education and the BFR successfully implementing those practices. The strong, resilient trust that results from reciprocal exchanges allows the relationship to survive occasional instances of unexpected behavior or consequences. Over time, this resilient trust transforms the relationship from one where the NOL and BFR are distinct parties with their own interests and a legal agreement binding them together into a completely unique testament to their hard-won trust. As NOL7 said of his time working with BFRs to manage his ranch,

The opportunity for two people to fully realize themselves, both individually and collectively as a unit, requires uncompromising trust. When that's not there, you may get things done, but the opportunity to realize potential and imagine things differently in that creative space is going to be compromised.

RQ5: What are the barriers to facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, and how are those barriers overcome?

Land Link coordinators were asked about challenges they face facilitating trust between a landowner and BFR, and to reflect on relationships that had not worked out and why. NOLs and BFRs were asked about challenges they had experienced in their land tenure relationships and how they overcame those conflicts. Interviewees identified the most prominent barriers as *lack of clearly established expectations, emotional unreadiness, perceived lack of knowledge, and social inhibition*.

Lack of clearly established expectations

According to participants, *lack of clearly established expectations* can cause trust to fail at any stage of trust development within extrafamilial land tenure relationships. If neither the NOL nor BFR has a realistic understanding of their expectations for their agricultural operation or their relationship, then their connection is at risk. When asked to consider the most challenging part of facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, LLA said of landowners, “If only they could tell us their true expectations before they’re already down the road. Some of the unspoken expectations are what hurt the most during these transition processes.” LLB reiterated this sentiment when she lamented, “When I think about the [matches] that fail, sometimes it was because what they were truly looking for was not necessarily what they were showing at the beginning.”

Interviewees highlighted the different kinds of expectations that participants must have clarity around, including the type of operation, financial structures, the role the BFR will play in the operation, and the emotional investment required for the success of the relationship. LLF described the role of a third-party in helping a BFR and landowner reflect on their expectations of a land tenure connection:

If you have no farm experience and this idyllic idea of Old McDonald had a farm [...] it can happen, but it's probably not going to happen the way you think it's going to happen.

We also must be realistic with those existing farmers because it takes a special individual to work with someone that's not a relative [...] If you're looking for the most bang for your buck, then visiting with a realtor or an auctioneer is probably going to be more fruitful than working with a beginning farmer.

Similarly, BFRs must have realistic expectations about the amount of time and work required to develop a trusting relationship with their landowner. LLG said,

How many [BFRs] are serious about this? How many of them are willing to put in the time and effort that it takes to build trust? It seems like we have a lot of folks who think they should be able to get a land access opportunity quickly, and you're competing against people who have been interning at farms for three or four years and have experience, and you can't just wake up one day and want to jump in there.

One way a NOL or BFR can solidify their expectations and ensure they are being met is to take the time to create a business and/or vision statement. This articulates their expectations in a manner anyone can view and understand, from a member of their extended family to their tenant or landowner. The statement acts as a touchstone for the involved parties to reference and revise as they go. The business and/or vision statement can also be used to inform the details of the negotiated exchange when a NOL and BFR put one in place. BFR2 recommended,

When you create a statement, you have your mindset on something you've got to target. If you don't have that, then you don't know what you're shooting at. It might be reducing inputs or improving soil health or cover cropping. If you have those goals in mind, then it's easy to look back at those and track them.

Some Land Link programs help participants clarify their expectations by incorporating formal training programs and curricula. These programs might help landowners consider their vision for their property's future, or for land seekers to develop business plans. LLC's program implemented questions and facilitation meant to directly help landowners and BFRs to assess their own ability to manage an agricultural operation together:

A lot of people come to us, thinking they were ready to take on stewardship of land, but then in conversation realize what they needed more was a farmer training program or an incubator program. We also get landowners [who] do not have agricultural experience [...] In that instance, it's important to educate those landowners on what it takes to make a farm happen.

LLH's program created their farm business development curriculum directly from successes they saw in land tenure relationships with clear expectations. The curriculum prepares BFRs directly with the technical information they need to engage confidently in land tenure relationship conversations. She explained:

We found that the most successful matches happen if both parties are at least a little bit educated and prepared for the conversations. We developed our certified farm startup program, which is our eight-week educational program where folks develop a business plan and figure out what kind of operation they're starting.

Establishing clear expectations at the beginning of a land tenure relationship helps the NOL and the BFR to gain mutual understanding of the other person's interests, intentions, and trajectory. This builds trust because it empowers the parties with the necessary information to work together effectively and co-create their relationship while minimizing concern that the other might be withholding their feelings or acting inauthentically. Business plans, vision

statements, and enshrining expectations in the negotiated exchange phase creates touchstones for the NOL and BFR to reference throughout their relationship to see if their expectations are being met. When expectations are consistently communicated from the outset, there is a greater chance the relationship will be able to withstand gaps between expectations and reality, rather than falling apart.

Emotional unreadiness

NOLs, BFRs, and coordinators also emphasized the barrier of *emotional unreadiness* to the development of a trusting land tenure relationship. Both the NOL and the BFR must be prepared for the long timelines, energetic investment, and trade-offs required to build a sustainable relationship, as described by LLB:

There are very few landowners in my system who are just going to gift a land seeker a completely functioning farm or ranch business [...] You're entering a formal business relationship, so you need to create agreements and strategies [...] This is just the very beginning of a long relationship you have to cultivate and nurture through the process.

NOLs must be open to the fact that a shift in land tenure will likely come with changes to the ways the property is managed, either by themselves or by a previous tenant. LLK elaborated on this by saying:

Successful matches are where the landowner is aware that someone else may do things differently from how they do it, and they're open to that [...] If you've spent 50 years farming in a particular way and then somebody does something differently, that can be really difficult.

NOL6 spoke to this part of his experience as a landowner confronting leaving the primary manager role at his ranch and transitioning it to his operator:

I have complete sympathy for those who can't let go because my ego was so wrapped around being a ranch manager. Who am I if I'm not a ranch manager? I see that across the board in owner-operators who are really having trouble letting go, even to their own offspring, let alone to somebody that's not in the family.

The third-party supporter can help NOLs and BFRs to explore and process their emotions around their relationship within the environment of safety that they help to create. The third party can ask questions and initiate conversations that help a landowner and BFR to truly understand what they want and what the process looks like for obtaining it. When asked how to help landowners and BFRs to overcome some of the emotional obstacles to forming a land tenure relationship, LLA said,

Like marriage counseling before you get married – counseling landowners and maybe [BFRs] to make sure you're in the right mindset to go through this process before they even fill out an application. Are they in the right mindset, know what their ultimate goals are, and are ready to let go of some of that control and management in the next couple years?

Stewarding land in collaboration with another person is an emotionally weighty process, described earlier by BFR1 as “turning over your heart”. Whether the land has been in their family for generations or the NOL purchased it themselves during their lifetime, opening the process of land management to another person through a change in land tenure requires vulnerability. If a NOL is unprepared to confront the challenging emotional obstacles that inevitably arise, it is difficult for them to build trust with a BFR to whom they are unable to open their heart.

Perceived lack of knowledge

NOLs who were formerly operators or have no prior agricultural experience may consider their perceived lack of knowledge to be a barrier to forming land tenure relationships with BFRs. The sense that they do not have all the information may give rise to distrust around BFRs' management decisions or cause the NOL to feel unempowered to ask questions about happenings on their land. When asked about her biggest challenge as a NOL, NOL1 highlighted all the ways agriculture and society have changed since she helped her father farm while growing up:

There are pieces of equipment that people use, and I don't even know what they're called [...] The pests are different, the weather is changing, the chemicals continue to change the public and their attitude toward it continues to change. Just staying abreast so I can stay conversational even is a challenge. It's a lot to keep up with to understand the day-to-day pressure.

Communication between a BFR and NOL is essential for ensuring the NOL can continue to be a knowledgeable, well-informed owner of their land. BFR6 described how he and his landowner overcome misunderstandings about management decisions: "Sometimes on those issues where what we're doing doesn't make sense to me, we reframe and walk through it in a way that does to both of us."

Information does not even always have to come from one of the parties in the relationship about practices. NOL2 shared about how BFR2 subscribed her to a rangeland research publication to learn more about some of the practices he planned to adopt on her property, and how it helps to spark discussions between them about the management of the land: "It's such a good magazine. There are always a couple interesting articles and I go, 'Oh, I didn't know that. I'll ask [BFR2] about it.'"

Simultaneously, some BFRs sense NOLs do not understand the reality of land access challenges, and do not recognize the opportunity a land tenure relationship could provide to a BFR. BFR8 reflected,

There are a lot of landowners who have CRP and they just want to own the land and make money off that land doing nothing [...] There's just a major lack of understanding between non-operators and operators. The amount of work that was put into communication by us with our extended family to lease the land was immense.

LLF reiterated how this lack of understanding can make it difficult for his program to reach NOLs and increase awareness about the need of BFRs for land access:

...The vast majority [of NOLs] that I have dealt with in my program really aren't aware of allowing the next generation to come in and farm, to have the opportunity to farm. Ultimately, their end goal has been to get the most money for their property, either for themselves or their family when the times comes. They might be interested in renting to a younger farmer at a more reasonable price. I'm not saying they aren't out there, but it's hard to find those people and get them that information.

According to our interviewees, more exploration is needed to understand how to connect NOLs with information when they may not be physically present for in-person workshops and networking opportunities. One way to overcome this perceived lack of knowledge and to ensure that NOLs are empowered to effectively communicate with and trust their BFR is for a third party to help the landowner and BFR to reach mutual understanding about the other person's needs. LLC shared about the goal of her program to cultivate this mutual understanding:

A lot of landowners are in really tough situations. They might be land rich but not have a lot of cash on hand and need to figure out alternative ways to fund their retirement [...]

So trying to build that understanding amongst land seekers and then on the landowner side trying to build awareness of just how hard it is these days to get into farming.

When NOLs are empowered with technical information and knowledge about the practices used on their land – whether by their operator, a third-party, or other external resources – it creates a shared language and communication tool for NOLs and BFRs to use as they build trust. This can help to equalize the power dynamic between a NOL and BFR by minimizing the feeling that one knows more than the other. Additionally, sharing knowledge encourages both parties to approach their relationship with a sense of curiosity as they make decisions, rather than a sense of distrust that fuels making decisions separately.

Social inhibition

While social proximity can act as a major catalyst for forming a trusting land tenure relationship between NOLs and BFRs, some interviewees also identified it as a source of inhibition at different stages in the trust development process for both a NOL and BFR. Allegiance to a tenant who has managed land for their family for generations, or who the NOL grew up with personally, may make a NOL reluctant to transition the land to someone else even if they are interested in seeing a change. BFR2 said of NOL2, “Most people in her position are going to [retain their tenant] because maybe you were friends with their mom or aunt. If this was her mom making these decisions, this would not even be a discussion we’re having.”

In the negotiated exchange phase, social norms may also act as a potential obstacle to creating a written lease, particularly in places where verbal leases are more common. The request for a written lease or other essential form of negotiated exchange could be viewed by one party as a sign of the other’s distrust, rather than interest in strengthening trust. NOL4 said:

I do think that with verbal agreements, the agricultural community culture is such that we're all trustworthy. We believe in each other, we work with each other, we bend over backwards for our neighbors and that is much different than the urban environment. It might seem almost insulting to a lot of farmers that they would have to have more than a handshake.

Finally, from a BFR's perspective, complex social dynamics and cultural norms can inhibit their ability to integrate into the community where they are managing land. BFR8 and her family moved to the rural area where they ranch and experienced the discomfort of joining a community where some of their practices were viewed with suspicion. She said:

They don't know what we know and don't know. Especially when we're doing something different than everybody else with electric fencing and solar mobile water tanks and moving our cows around, putting our pigs out on pasture. We're the weird young people that are from the city. People don't know what we're doing, but they're skeptical.

BFR4 also highlighted cultural and social norms as the primary barrier to forming trusting land tenure relationships. He said, "I see a lot of 60-year-old guys renting ground where 25-year-olds really haven't had the same opportunity. One of the biggest barriers is age perception and creating a pathway for young people to know who to talk to."

BFR4 continued by saying his job working at a grain elevator helped him to network with landowners in his community, but other young people interested in farming may not benefit from similar social connections – a demonstration of the double-edged nature of social proximity as both a benefit and a potential obstacle.

Solutions to specifically overcome social inhibition in NOL/BFR land tenure relationships did not arise from the conversations in this study. However, overcoming social

inhibition may tie back to developing a landowners' emotional readiness as they process making changes to their management and land tenure relationship. *Social inhibition* may also be remedied by a BFR investing in their social networks to make connections for potential opportunities and to build credibility.

RQ6: What information sources and technical support do NOLs and BFRs use when forming new land tenure relationships?

Land Link coordinators were asked about what materials and supports are most helpful to landowners seeking to build trust with a BFR, and vice versa. NOLs and BFRs were asked about what tools and resources have been most helpful to them when forming and stewarding their land tenure relationships. The resource that interviewees most often utilized was their *interpersonal network* – both peer-to-peer and broader community.

A peer-to-peer interpersonal network gives BFRs and NOLs a chance to practically learn from other people in their position about their failures and successes. Peer-to-peer learning may happen through personal relationships or in more formalized ways like in-person workshops. BFR6 noted that he depends primarily on his relationships with BFRs in similar roles for resources and advice: “The number one thing is still keeping in touch with other people who are in the same boat as me, like [other beginning rancher friends] or my friend who manages avocado orchards out in California.”

Some NOLs also mentioned relying on personal relationships and opportunities to connect with other landowners navigating similar situations. NOL5 said,

Other landowners that have been through this process are really key. I've always relied on elders for information education. Not just elders, but certainly those that have been through what I'm working towards before. Even if you don't do things exactly the way they did, you can pick their brains for inspiration.

In-person workshops can also create peer-to-peer learning opportunities for NOLs to bounce ideas off other NOLs, BFRs to connect with other BFRs, and for both groups to brainstorm how to resolve conflicts and learn information they might not otherwise find easily accessible. BFR2 recognized how workshops inspire NOLs to consider pursuing alternative land tenure paths outside of their comfort zone:

More workshops on these things like structuring leases, business statements, figuring out goals – let’s call them support groups. When you feel supported, you’re more likely to step outside of your comfort zone. Finding that community and supporting them and having that network of people that you can say, “I’ve got this new guy. Here’s what he’s doing. Is this right or wrong?”

LLD views sense of community and storytelling as essential parts of including NOLs and BFRs in the conversation around innovative land tenure relationships, particularly for NOLs who may not know what to do with their land in the future and are potentially seeking alternatives to retaining their same tenant or selling. Building on BFR2’s point made earlier in this section about how support and camaraderie increase comfort level, LLD said:

We need to create streams of information for landowners who are kind of on the fence or want to learn more. Landowners need not just information but stories of other landowners doing brave and good things. I think sometimes in the world of farmland access and particularly around farming practices, we overestimate the power of information, and we underestimate the power of inspiration, story, and being part of a community and part of a movement.

Beyond peer-to-peer networks, some BFRs emphasized the importance of their broader community network as a resource that evolved social connections into land tenure relationships.

As BFRs develop skills and demonstrate credibility, more NOLs may be inclined to consider them as possible tenants. This requires significant initiative on the part of the BFR; they must be open to putting themselves out there and voicing their intentions. BFR7 discussed how he connected with several of his landowners by observing their properties around him and contacting them when he noticed a potential management opportunity. Even if they did not take him up on his offer right away, they eventually reached back out because he had specifically asked and made his interest known. He said,

A lot of young men and women are too shy to express interest or they're too scared of failure or that opportunity not working out [...] They think that they'll help the older guys out and hope that someday when the older guy starts start slowing down and retires, he'll think of them.

Leveraging their interpersonal network can also benefit landowners by helping them to act on their unrealized interest in creating a land tenure relationship with a BFR by bringing more young, qualified candidates into their orbit.

To effectively use their interpersonal networks as a resource for building and sustaining land tenure relationships, neither NOLs nor BFRs can be passive participants among their peers and communities. Both parties must be actively responsible for pursuing opportunities to build knowledge and make connections that could evolve into a shift toward land tenure. Taking on a role within a network can familiarize other people with the needs of a landowner or operator, and even the shared interests between them, bringing to light critical motivators for forming a land tenure relationship. Investing in interpersonal networks strengthens the social proximity between a NOL and a BFR, which can lay essential groundwork for them to develop trust.

Summary

Myriad factors play into how NOLs and BFRs develop trusting land tenure relationships. NOLs are motivated to form land tenure relationships with BFRs when they have confidence in the BFR's credibility. BFRs are motivated to form relationships with NOLs out of necessity and the perception that NOLs are more likely to think outside the box about land management. When a BFR and NOL connect and initiate a land tenure relationship, a shared social network and/or geographic area are the strongest forms of proximity between them and create a sense of fragile trust. If social and geographic proximities do not exist, shared values that shape their shared vision must be strong enough to compensate.

The support of a third party to a land tenure relationship is critical because they empower NOLs and BFRs with information and create a sense of safety for the involved parties to interact authentically and honestly. This is especially essential in the negotiated exchange phase, when a written legal agreement helps the parties to demonstrate their dedication to each other and articulate their expectations. Over time, as they abide by the guidelines of their negotiated exchange, the NOL and BFR are able to evolve into the reciprocal exchange phase of their relationship. Reciprocal exchanges require the NOL and BFR to go above and beyond and take risks to create something new.

The barriers to trusting land tenure relationships between NOLs and BFRs are a lack of clearly established expectations, emotional unreadiness by both the NOL, perceived lack of knowledge among NOLs, and social inhibition. When forming and stewarding their land tenure relationships, BFRs and NOLs primarily rely on their interpersonal networks to create opportunities that connect them with other people in their position and with each other.

Chapter Five – Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators to build a framework for trust development between non-related parties to apply to agricultural land tenure relationships. This chapter will restate the research problem and methodology used to conduct this study, and then lay out conclusions, discussion, and the implications of this research.

Against the backdrop of the triple threat challenge and the Great Wealth Transfer, BFRs face financial and social barriers to starting and sustaining agricultural businesses (Ackoff et al., 2022; Carolan, 2018; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016; Valliant et al., 2020). Simultaneously, stable land access for BFRs via land tenure relationships like lease arrangements, rental agreements, or ownership transfer increases the likelihood that BFRs will adopt production practices that can mitigate the impacts of the triple threat challenge (Adenuga et al., 2021; Calo, 2018; Carolan, 2018; Lu et al., 2022; Munden-Dixon et al., 2018; Stevens & Wu, 2021). NOLs are a rising force in agricultural land ownership and a potential audience to form stable land tenure relationships with BFRs, but are a heterogeneous group with varied needs and motivations that require further exploration (Barnett et al., 2020; Basche & Carter, 2020; Bawa & Callahan, 2021; Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021).

To fill the gap in our knowledge regarding how BFRs and NOLs form trusting land tenure relationships, the following research questions were used.

- **RQ1:** What motivates a NOL to form a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and vice versa?

- **RQ2:** What dimensions of proximity support the development of trust between non-related NOLs and BFRs in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ3:** What role does a third-party supporter play in the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR in a land tenure relationship?
- **RQ4:** How do reciprocal and negotiated social exchanges influence the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR?
- **RQ5:** What are the barriers to facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, and how are those barriers overcome?
- **RQ6:** What information sources and technical support do NOLs and BFRs use when forming new land tenure relationships?

These questions were examined using a qualitative, grounded theory approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Land Link coordinators, eight BFRs, and seven NOLs (see Appendices C, E, and F). Interviewees were selected purposively and using snowball sampling based on the criteria that they were either the primary coordinator of their Land Link program; a NOL who had formed a land tenure relationship with a BFR; or a BFR who had formed a land tenure relationship with a NOL. Proximity Theory and SET were combined and used to inform the interview instruments due to their previous application to understanding land tenure relationships and trusting resource exchanges, respectively (Boschma, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Fischer et al., 2019; Leonhardt, 2024; Molm et al., 2009). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher or using the Rev transcription software and were analyzed using an iterative and constant comparative process modeled after methods in Boeije (2002) and Merriam (2009).

Conclusions

RQ1: What motivates a NOL to form a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and vice versa?

A baseline motivation is the catalyzing reason behind why a NOL or a BFR decides to pursue a land tenure relationship with the other party. NOLs are motivated to form a relationship with a specific BFR when they can witness their work ethic, or credibility, in real life and trust that they will manage the land effectively and responsibly. The motivational force of a BFR's credibility for a NOL reflects the tenant of SET that some trust may be precipitated prior to any exchange occurring at all when one party knows the other to be reputable (Molm et al., 2009). A NOL's interest in having a competent tenant stewarding their property may also be related to their care for and emplacement on agricultural land that has previously been minimized by the term "absentee" (Barron et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2024; Petrzelka et al., 2025). It is important to note that every NOL who participated in this study highlighted a deep emotional connection to their agricultural land.

A NOL's motivation by a BFR's credibility aligns with the finding from the AFT NOL survey that both male and female landowners ranked "trustworthiness" as the most important quality to consider when evaluating potential farm operators. Similarly, female landowners also in the AFT NOL survey ranked "reputation as a good farmer" and "that they care about my land" as the second and third most important qualities, respectively (Petrzelka et al., 2021). When a BFR meets these criteria, a NOL may be more inclined to consider taking them on as a tenant despite financial risks they might take on their behalf, or to give them low-cost land access opportunities because of the credible assistance they provide.

The first motivation for a BFR to form a relationship with a NOL is a sense of necessity. To a BFR, a land tenure relationship with a NOL represents an opportunity to overcome land access barriers and/or financial barriers in the way of growing their business. The opportunity to

work for a NOL is one way that BFRs can expand their business while minimizing their financial risk. This corroborates previous findings that BFRs are more open to pursuing alternative forms of land tenure in light of the challenges that more traditional pathways pose (Bauman et al., 2022; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016; Stevens & Wu, 2022; Thilmany et al., 2022; Valliant et al., 2022).

The second motivation for a BFR to form a land tenure relationship with a NOL is the sense that a NOL may “think outside the box” about land management, more so than a traditional landowner. This works in tandem with the tendency of BFRs to adopt innovative practices when they are provided with stable land tenure (Munden-Dixon et al., 2018; Stevens & Wu, 2022). BFRs in this study credited NOLs’ openness to land management decisions outside the echo chamber of conventional agriculture, where they are otherwise surrounded by like-minded landowners. Instead, their contexts within other communities and exposure to information sources may make them more open to trying new practices. This finding partially contradicts the result from the AFT NOL survey, which found that NOLs, and particularly female NOLs, with minimal farming experience themselves were less confident than experienced landowners in asking their operator to adopt certain conservation practices, and felt they did not know enough to participate in making land management decisions (Petrzelka et al., 2021). In this study, NOLs across a range of experience levels were willing and interested to see innovative practices adopted on their properties and intentionally connected with BFRs who could help them achieve that.

Because of this openness, BFRs may perceive NOLs to be more resilient to the risks and mistakes that may arise for BFRs still in the early years of their career. Some NOLs are not as dependent on the income from their land and likely have access to more capital than a BFR or

other owner-operator (Petrzelka et al., 2013; Sorice, 2018; Valliant et al., 2022). When the NOL has significant financial security to invest in infrastructure and to support the BFR to try new things, the consequences of the BFR's decisions may not have as drastic an impact on the operation as they would if the BFR was trying to run their business alone. However, the reality of this perception is heavily dependent on the type of land tenure agreement the NOL and BFR have, and the circumstances of the NOL's land ownership. For example, a NOL may be reliant on a BFR's good financial and managerial decision making to fund their retirement. While this motivation may be a sound option for some BFRs looking to start their operation in collaboration with a NOL, it is highly context specific.

RQ2: What dimensions of proximity support the development of trust between non-related NOLs and BFRs in a land tenure relationship?

Proximity in a land tenure relationship creates common ground and a degree of familiarity that helps NOLs and BFRs to form an initial connection. A NOL and BFR may have a social network and/or geographic area in common, a shared vision for land management, or a similar educational or cultural background. Land Link coordinators, BFRs, and NOLs in this study reiterated the finding from Leonhardt (2024) that social and geographic proximity are the two most influential forms of proximity, and that the other proximities (institutional, organizational, cognitive) must be strong enough to compensate when social or geographic proximity are lacking.

Social and geographic proximities are an opportunity for the NOL and BFR to acquaint themselves with the other person's credibility and reputation, which are key motivators for the parties to form a relationship with each other. Both forms of proximity inform shared experiences and learning that can otherwise be difficult for NOLs and BFRs to replicate. When social and/or geographic proximities do not exist between a NOL and BFR, cognitive,

organizational, or institutional proximities must compensate for that lack (Boschma, 2005). In this study, cognitive, organizational, and institutional proximities often took the form of shared values that informed a shared vision for the NOL and BFR and acted as an avenue for them to test each other's credibility, find a sense of commonality, and have real conversations about their interests for the future of the land (Basche & Carter, 2021). For some of the interviewees, cognitive proximity created an entry point for the NOL and BFR to relate to each other through shared knowledge over practices such as permaculture design and Holistic Management. Others were part of an organizational arrangement that exposed them to each other's values and how they lived them in their day-to-day lives, such as serving on a nonprofit board together. Finally, institutional proximity can be critical when a BFR is interested in certain management practices but must connect with a NOL who will support them, and vice versa. Without any of the five proximities, the NOL and BFR will struggle relate to each other and co-create a foundation for their relationship (Leonhardt, 2024).

RQ3: What role does a third-party supporter play in the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR in a land tenure relationship?

Nearly all participants in this study highlighted the essential role a third-party supporter plays in the development of a trusting land tenure relationship between a NOL and BFR. The third party could be a Land Link coordinator, professional facilitator, lawyer, farm manager, or even a neighbor. The role of a third party is twofold in stewarding a land tenure relationship: their expertise can help to empower the NOL and BFR with information to make their relationship successful, and their neutral presence can help to create a sense of safety for the NOL and BFR to bring honesty and authenticity to interactions and agreements.

The third party must be a neutral actor with the best interests of both the NOL and the BFR in mind. With this information the supporter is able to advocate for the trustworthiness of

each party to each other, especially when the individual parties have had few opportunities to build interpersonal trust through their own interactions. By doing this, the third party fosters a feeling of reputability and goodwill between the NOL and BFR that helps to strengthen trust as they determine whether to engage in further social exchanges (Molm et al., 2009).

Previous research found NOLs to be more reliant on personal relationships than professional “intermediaries” to inform land management choices like the adoption of conservation practices (Ranjan et al., 2024). Our study suggests that a third-party supporter may play a more outsized role in emotionally charged decisions like forming new land tenure relationships because of their neutrality and ability to see a developing arrangement from all perspectives. Over time, as the NOL and BFR create their own patterns of communication and cooperative decision making, and gain confidence utilizing the knowledge they have been empowered with, they become less reliant on the third party and more reliant on their mutually developed trust.

RQ4: How do negotiated and reciprocal social exchanges influence the development of trust between a NOL and a BFR?

The negotiated exchanges identified by participants in this study were legal agreements such as written leases and employment agreements. In the trust development process, these exchanges served as opportunities for NOLs and BFRs to demonstrate their dedication to each other and articulate their expectations, so that nothing is left up to chance or interpretation in a way that could threaten their relationship. This finding echoes the importance of negotiated exchanges to creating transparency for NOLs and BFRs around management practices, goals, and timelines in prior studies (Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022).

The details of the negotiated exchange provide the NOL and BFR with guidelines to predict the other person’s behavior and prevent exploitation in the risky context of an early-phase

land tenure relationship, creating a sense of fragile trust. Yet because the negotiated exchange enshrines a set of purely transactional guidelines, it does not predict perfectly how the parties will act on each other's behalf outside of legal bounds or in extraordinary circumstances (Molm et al., 2009). As the NOL and the BFR abide by the guidelines of their negotiated exchange, a sense of security and comfortability begins to develop that allows their relationship to evolve toward these more trusting reciprocal exchanges of time, energy, and resources rather than purely transactional ones (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017).

When a BFR and NOL go above and beyond the terms of their negotiated exchange and continually take risks to create and sustain their land tenure relationship, they engage in reciprocal exchanges that evolve fragile trust into resilient trust. Reciprocal exchanges can occur when the parties find themselves in a set of unexpected circumstances, such as when NOL1's land was threatened by century flooding and she relied on her BFR to act quickly and manage the consequences. They may also happen in the context of mundane, day-to-day circumstances, as when BFR3 described taking steps to put extra work into his land stewardship and tasks. These instances compound on one another to accumulate social capital and a feeling of greater interpersonal attachment that acts as the glue forming the bonds of a land tenure relationship (Molm et al., 2009).

The resilient trust created by a series of reciprocal exchanges strengthens a land tenure relationship to the point that it can weather occasional instances where trust is breached or degraded (Molm et al., 2009). Taking risks on each other's behalf inherently places a NOL and BFR in a situation where things may not go as planned. When BFR6's landowner took the risk to give him more managerial control over calving and it did not work out, his landowner chose to maintain their relationship while reclaiming some decision-making power. The social capital

they had developed over time by engaging in reciprocal exchanges allowed their relationship to survive a set of unexpected circumstances because of its greater flexibility and trust (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

RQ5: What are the barriers to facilitating trust between a NOL and a BFR, and how are those barriers overcome?

Every Land Link coordinator interviewed for this study highlighted lack of clearly established expectations as an obstacle to forming trusting, sustainable land tenure relationships. NOLs and BFRs must take time to reflect and transparently share their expectations with each other as well as periodically check in to ensure those expectations are being met. This reiterates previous conclusions reached in studies of Land Link program success, which recommended more Land Link programs incorporate opportunities for landowners and land seekers to share and work through their expectations with each other (Hersey & Adams, 2017). Clear expectations can help a NOL and BFR's individual expectations cohere into a shared vision that guides them through cooperative decision making for land management (Basche & Carter, 2021; Carolan, 2005). External programming such as beginning farmer business development training, while often falling short of meeting BFR land access needs, can be a useful resource for BFRs to gain clarity around their expectations (Carolan, 2018). Our study found such programming may also be helpful for NOLs to develop business and vision statements and delineate their own goals for their land tenure relationship.

Study participants also named emotional unreadiness as a barrier to trust development in a land tenure relationship, particularly for NOLs. Succession planning of any kind is an emotionally fraught process, and NOLs in this study exhibited the same personal connection and concern for the health and future of their agricultural land as any other type of operator (Lopez et al., 2024; Petrzalka et al., 2025; Purc-Stephenson et al., 2025). The NOLs interviewed for this

study – specifically those who were former operators themselves – demonstrated a willingness to overcome their emotional barriers and “let go” of managerial control to see the land managed by a credible young person and in a way that achieves their management goals. Several credited their emotional readiness to the support of a third party who asked them questions that helped them to process their emotions around land tenure and transition, related to the observation in Hersey and Adams (2017) that Land Link coordinators have an important role to play in helping NOLs to work through emotional obstacles.

Perceived lack of knowledge as an impediment to trust development echoed previous findings that some NOLs may be deterred from openly communicating with a BFR about management decisions and adoption of certain practices because they feel they do not know enough (Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). This phenomenon has been highlighted in the past among female NOLs who have minimal or no on-farm experience themselves (Barnett et al., 2020; Petrzalka et al., 2021). However, of the eight NOLs interviewed for this study, five were female, and four of them demonstrated significant confidence in their existing knowledge or their ability to attain the knowledge necessary to cooperatively make suggestions and decisions with their BFR. Therefore, the clear nuances in perceived knowledge among female NOLs identified in Fairchild & Petrzalka (2022) were reflected in this study and contrasted with previous findings in Barnett et al. (2020) and Petrzalka et al. (2021).

Some BFR interviewees also expressed frustration with perceived lack of knowledge among NOLs about the challenges BFRs face attempting to enter and stay in agriculture. They viewed this lack as both a barrier to trust development and to land tenure opportunities arising for BFRs at all. While third party supporters such as Land Link coordinators can help to facilitate mutual understanding between NOLs and BFRs, the need for outreach and educational materials

specifically tailored to NOLs could be a potential forum for this awareness to be developed and disseminated (Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022; Hersey & Adams, 2017; Petrzela et al., 2013).

Through the lens of Proximity Theory, lack of cognitive proximity and a shared knowledge base between a NOL and BFR can be prohibitive to their ability to innovate together and co-create the future of the land. Simultaneously, too close cognitive proximity can smother creative thinking and risk-taking because the NOL and BFR share the same ideas about everything and cannot take steps to transform land management beyond the bounds of a traditional land tenure pathway (Boschma, 2005). In this study, the tension between what one party knew and what the other was willing to learn allowed NOLs and BFRs to create a shared knowledge base unique to their relationship and communication styles.

Finally, interviewees reflected on social inhibition as an impeding force in the trust development process. BFR participants reiterated previous findings that social inhibition can get in the way of their ability to pursue land tenure opportunities or, once they have secured an opportunity, fully integrate into their newfound community or context (Carolan, 2018). Several BFRs discussed the importance of leveraging social networks and alternative development opportunities outside of the “succession ladder” to make connections with peers and potential landowners (Eggerman, 2023; Munden-Dixon, et al., 2019).

NOLs in this study focused more on how social inhibition may impact other landowners *like* them, rather than them personally, and spoke to their prioritization of certain land management and tenure choices over their social reputation (Petrzelka et al., 2021). A few NOLs recognized the need to take the risk of making a change that deviated from local norms to achieve goals for the future of their land, even when it impacted a land tenure relationship with an existing tenant. This indicates while some previous research found NOLs to be deferent to

social forces when considering the adoption of certain conservation practices, they may be less influenced by social context when considering changes in land tenure (Fairchild & Petrzela, 2022).

It is important to note that NOLs interviewed for this research did not identify financial risk as a potential barrier to forming a land tenure relationship with a BFR. This is a departure from previous studies that found NOLs to be more likely to adopt innovative land management practices if more financial incentives were provided (Carolan, 2005; Mase et al., 2017; Ranjan et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). The NOLs interviewed for this research prioritized the future condition of their agricultural land over immediate financial returns and focused on developing mutually beneficial opportunities for themselves and the BFR. Rather than pursue these relationships exclusively as negotiated, transactional sources of income, the NOLs derived significant fulfillment from more socioemotional reciprocal exchanges such as providing an opportunity for a credible young person and seeing their land stewarded with management practices they may not have been able to implement themselves (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2017).

RQ6: What information sources and technical support do NOLs and BFRs use when forming new land tenure relationships?

Both NOL and BFR participants identified their interpersonal networks as their greatest resource when forming new land tenure relationships. Opportunities like peer-to-peer learning, mentoring relationships, workshops, and support groups for NOLs and BFRs to interact with people in their same position creates space for knowledge and experiences to be transmitted about extrafamilial land tenure. Networking also connects NOLs and BFRs who may not otherwise meet, which strengthens the web of resources they might tap into to form new relationships.

As in one-on-one relationships, interpersonal networks leverage the proximities between people for effective knowledge transmission and innovation (Jalil et al., 2025). The experiences shared by BFRs with other BFRs, NOLs with other NOLs, and the parties with each other help to create a sense of safety and trust that allows participants to be honest. The common value that NOLs and BFRs place on the success of extrafamilial land tenure relationships and/or the proliferation of certain management practices may also incline them toward vulnerably sharing their experiences for the benefit of a peer (Boschma, 2005).

The interest of NOLs and BFRs in this study in interpersonal networks aligns with findings from previous studies that NOLs and BFRs both overwhelmingly utilize and benefit from networking and learning opportunities (Carolan, 2018; Fairchild & Petrzalka, 2022; Kueper et al., 2013; Petrzalka et al., 2013; Seng et al., 2020). This echoes a pattern among producers and landowners at large who value informal learning opportunities and access to peer networks for promoting the adoption of conservation practices and other innovations. Interpersonal network engagement can be particularly effective for persuading landowners and producers who are on the fence about certain practices or decisions (Jalil et al., 2025).

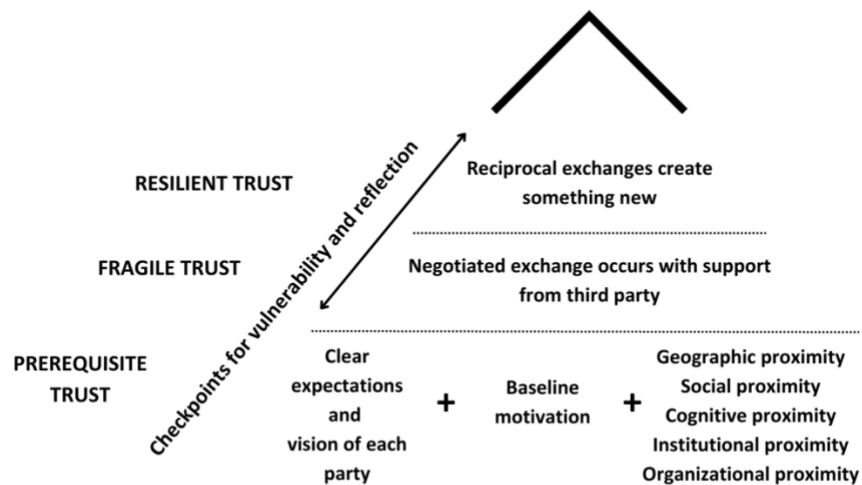
These findings indicate the opportunity is ripe to bring NOLs and BFRs together to network with each other, which could help landowners and prospective tenants to connect and overcome some of the social barriers mentioned in the previous section. Increased interpersonal networking opportunities can also expose more potential parties interested in alternative land tenure pathways to stories of extrafamilial NOL/BFR relationships and the elements that make them successful and sustainable.

Discussion

The results of this study represent the real-world experiences of Land Link coordinators, BFRs, and NOLs interpreted through the lenses of Proximity Theory and SET. Our findings were used to develop a framework for how trust develops between NOLs and BFRs in land tenure relationships. The framework describes the steps required to build trust between these parties. The themes are presented in the order that they generally occur in the trust development process, moving up vertically from the bottom of the visual model, though the process may not be linear for every unique relationship.

Figure 5. 1

The Framework for Trust Development in Extrafamilial Land Tenure Relationships



Prerequisite Trust: Clear expectations, baseline motivations, and the five proximities

The first stage of the framework for trust development is prerequisite trust. This phase consists of three parts: the clearly established expectations of each party, a baseline motivation, and one or more types of shared proximity between the NOL and the BFR. Prerequisite trust

forms the base of the pyramid structure of the framework because it is the foundation of the entire land tenure relationship.

Prior to pursuing any type of land tenure relationship, a NOL and BFR must each have their own fleshed out set of expectations and vision for the future of their land and/or business. To steward this phase, opportunities for NOLs and BFRs to engage in these thought processes and tangibly express them via tools like a business or vision statement are critical for each party to have an idea of what they want before initiating an agreement with another person. Articulating these expectations can act as a touchstone for the parties to repeatedly refer to throughout each phase of the trust development process to ensure that their expectations are being met, to assess what has changed, and adjust as necessary.

Once their expectations and vision are in place, both the NOL and BFR must feel a sense of motivation driving them toward pursuing an alternative land tenure relationship. This motivation, paired with their expectations and vision, acts as a constant throughline via which the NOL and BFR each meet a need held by the other person. For example, a NOL feels passionate about transitioning their land from conventional to regenerative, and a BFR needs an opportunity to grow their regenerative beef business. When the sense of motivation is enough to put the NOL or BFR in the headspace of pursuing this type of relationship, they can initiate the process of identifying another person who can help to meet their need. Finding the other person is a process that may happen organically through their social network or through a formalized program like Land Link.

Identifying and acting on their motivation is a part of the process where a NOL or BFR can work to overcome – or at least make peace with – any sense of social inhibition that could hurt trust development. The sense of motivation must be strong enough for a NOL to understand

their choices may not be widely accepted in their community or may impact existing land tenure relationships. For a BFR, it must be strong enough to help them work through the discomfort of potentially moving to a new community or adopting practices that are viewed with skepticism by others around them.

Finally, when a NOL and BFR initially connect with each other, at least one of the five types of proximity must be present to create a sense of common ground that informs their collaborative vision. They may have preexisting social or geographic proximity that creates a strong sense of shared experience, or shared values rooted in organizational, institutional, or cognitive proximities that compensate (Boschma, 2005). Combined with the fully fleshed out expectations of each party and their motivation to work together, one or more types of proximity create the connective tissue at the heart of a NOL and BFR's trust development process.

Fragile trust: negotiated exchange with support from a third party

Once the NOL and BFR have formed their initial connection and decide to pursue a land tenure relationship, they move into the fragile trust phase, which happens when they engage in a negotiated exchange with the support of a third party (Molm et al., 2009). The third party – whether a Land Link coordinator, a legal professional, farm manager, or other intermediary – cultivates enough of a sense of safety for the NOL and BFR to legally formalize their relationship in an arrangement like a lease or employment agreement. The third party uses their expertise to help the NOL and BFR navigate the technical complexities of developing their agreement that could otherwise challenge their fledgling trust.

The negotiated exchange enshrines the expectations of the NOL and BFR in a set of rules that guide them toward achieving their goals and shared vision. It builds fragile trust by using these rules to foster predictability for each party about the other's behavior and decision making. This creates not only an opportunity for the NOL and BFR to repeatedly demonstrate their

commitment to each other by abiding by the negotiated exchange but also opportunities for them to act in ways that move their relationship into the third phase of trust development. Fragile trust behaves as the connective tissue in the center of the framework that ties the prerequisite trust and resilient trust phases together.

Resilient trust: reciprocal exchanges create something new

The third phase of trust development is resilient trust. This phase can last indefinitely as trust builds in a land tenure relationship. Resilient trust forms when a NOL and BFR repeatedly engage in reciprocal exchanges that go above and beyond the terms of their negotiated exchange and often involve them taking risks for the sake of seeing their shared vision come to fruition. These exchanges strengthen fragile trust into resilient trust because the behavior of each party is not solely dictated by legal terms, but also by the mutual goodwill and interpersonal attachment that the NOL and BFR have formed (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Molm et al., 2009). Reciprocal exchanges are unique to the NOL and the BFR involved in the relationship and are emblematic of the specific departures they have made to pursue an alternative land tenure pathway in collaboration.

Over time, as these exchanges compound on each other like layers on a pearl, the trust between a NOL and BFR becomes strong enough that they can maintain their relationship with less frequent energetic investment than in previous phases, but with more meaningful social exchanges. This is reflected in the pyramid structure of the framework: the foundation of prerequisite trust and scaffolding provided by fragile trust physically take up more of the model to signify the amount of effort and resources that they require compared to resilient trust. Resilient trust is the apex point all relationships aim to evolve toward, and the caret marking the top of the framework indicates how this evolution continues in ways that are unique to each relationship and its social exchanges.

The constant thread: checkpoints for vulnerability and reflection

The entire trust development framework is underpinned by “checkpoints for vulnerability and reflection”. These checkpoints are opportunities for the NOL and BFR to repeatedly and consistently evaluate their relationship against their expectations and goals, and to communicate with each other about changes and successes. A checkpoint could be a consistent meeting between the NOL, BFR, and third party to address any conflicts or questions that have arisen as the relationship develops. It could also be a check-in between the NOL and BFR reexamining their business and vision statements to reflect on whether goals are being met or need to be changed. The frequency of the checkpoints depends on the needs and nuances of the NOL and BFR’s relationship; for example, more checkpoints may be necessary in the prerequisite and fragile trust phases as the parties get to know each other and work with a third party to determine the terms of their lease. As time goes on, and their trust strengthens into resiliency, the checkpoints may occur less frequently but are still important opportunities for the NOL and BFR to check in with each other about the status of their relationship.

By building these conversations into the framework and chances for each party to process their own emotions around their relationship, NOLs and BFRs can neutralize threats to their trust by two of the primary barriers identified in this study: lack of clearly established expectations and emotional unreadiness. They can also act as opportunities to evaluate “medium-term” outcomes that have previously been difficult to measure in extrafamilial land tenure relationships formed through programs like Land Link (Valliant et al., 2019).

Flexibility within the framework

A land tenure relationship between a NOL and a BFR may not develop in a linear manner through this framework, and that trust can build or degrade in different directions. This is captured by the double-ended arrow moving both up and down at the center of the framework.

While most of the relationships explored in this study did evolve linearly, two notable examples deviated from this pattern. NOL5 and BFR5 engaged in many iterations of reciprocal exchanges that strengthened their trust before they chose to sign a lease agreement. Through difficult conversations, they returned to the basics of their expectations and shared vision in the prerequisite trust phase of their relationship to feel secure enough to enter a longer-term legal arrangement. Similarly, BFR6 and his NOL had yet to formalize any type of legal agreement at the time of this study, but that did not prohibit the two of them from continually building resilient trust and choosing to continue their relationship even when certain risks did not pay off as expected.

Practical Implications & Recommendations

The framework for trust development was informed by the real-world experiences of NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators who steward extrafamilial land tenure relationships. The results of this study demonstrate that trusting, sustainable land tenure relationships are a viable pathway pursued by NOLs seeking BFRs who can implement desirable management practices on their properties, and by BFRs in need of land access opportunities and interested in NOLs who are more open to agricultural innovation. The success of these relationships requires significant investment of time, energy, and resources by the people involved, including anyone in a third-party support role.

This research has several practical implications. This study captured a small glimpse of the reality that NOLs and BFRs make up some proportion of the two-thirds of land tenure relationships between extrafamilial tenants and landowners, and that these relationships serve to help BFRs to overcome land access barriers while bringing more innovative practices onto NOL-owned landscapes (Valliant et al., 2022). This demonstrates the importance of exposing more

NOLs and BFRs to the success stories of these opportunities so that they might consider pursuing them, particularly as the number of NOLs owning agricultural land increases (Bawa & Callahan, 2021). Success stories must be incorporated into existing outreach and training materials for BFRs, as well as into outreach materials specifically created for NOLs identified as a need in other studies, such as informational webpages linked in newsletters, materials landowners receive in the mail, or printed materials shared by county Extension offices (Fairchild & Petrzeka, 2022; Petrzeka et al., 2013).

Interpersonal networking opportunities are one way to share these success stories and fulfill a resource NOLs, BFRs, and Land Link coordinators in this study actively use and are interested in seeing more of. In the prerequisite trust phase, interpersonal networking lays groundwork for trust by familiarizing NOLs and BFRs with elements of successful land tenure relationships and building connections with potential land tenure partners with whom they share proximities. This could take place via workshops, focus groups, or mixers that bring different landowners and BFRs together, either in-person or remotely, to learn about approaches to land tenure, explore options for themselves, and consider important parts of extrafamilial trust development before their relationship is even initiated.

Before a relationship is catalyzed, NOLs and BFRs also benefit from opportunities to clarify their vision for the future of their land or business. Educational experiences and workshops like BFR business development training or succession planning curricula geared toward NOLs are critical tools to help parties flesh out their expectations and improve emotional readiness for the work of land tenure. One-on-one counseling with a third party can help NOLs to cultivate greater emotional awareness and for BFRs to build their credibility. More people who make up the “team” of a NOL or BFR – whether a lawyer, Land Link coordinator,

Extension agent, accountant, etc. – should be trained in the framework for trust development to help facilitate the challenging conversations that help NOLs and BFRs to confront questions that must be answered before they can begin to build trust with each other.

As a relationship evolves through the trust development process, interpersonal networking with other NOLs and BFRs engaged in extrafamilial land tenure can be a critical tool for stabilizing trust. Interactions with others in the same position facilitate checkpoints for reflection, vulnerability, and peer-to-peer learning by bringing in many voices with different experiences to help NOLs and BFRs work through questions and share new ideas. Especially as the role of the third-party supporter diminishes over time through the trust development process, it is important for NOLs and BFRs to have a well-established support network to act as a sounding board for their relationship, and as a vehicle for sharing experiences with prospective landowners and tenants interested in pursuing extrafamilial land tenure.

The results of this study also validated the important role that negotiated exchanges like lease and employment agreements play in the development of trusting land tenure relationships. Despite the sustained popularity of verbal leases in many of the communities where NOLs own land, written legal agreements adopted by the people in this study indisputably helped to create greater safety and security for the parties to develop trust (Petrzelka et al., 2020). Educational and outreach materials written for NOLs, who particularly may be steeped in the culture of a verbal or short-term lease, should feature information about the importance of thorough, written legal agreements to trust development (Petrzelka et al., 2021). Third-party supporters should gather lease templates and examples of negotiated exchanges that encompass elements of interest for NOLs and BFRs, such as soil health goals and the practices that will achieve them. Additionally, BFRs should be equipped with the skills to advocate for and contribute to the

creation of written legal agreements that protect their interests while still resulting in a mutual benefit for both parties.

Future Research Recommendations

The framework for trust development in this study was informed by the experiences of a limited audience who were purposively and snowball sampled and engaged in qualitative interviews. The NOLs who participated in this research were notably emplaced and emotionally connected to their agricultural land, which may have motivated them to take part in this study in a way that other NOLs may not experience. A quantitative study using a written survey would be useful to reach a wider variety of NOLs and BFRs to test and refine the framework. This research also represented NOLs and BFRs from different geographic areas, though primarily the Midwest, and varying operation types and sizes. Further research to explore how trust development changes in different geographic areas and across more types of operations is necessary to strengthen our understanding of how to more effectively support NOLs and BFRs engaged in land tenure across a range of experiences.

The experiences of NOLs in this study notably differed from prior research in two areas: a majority of the NOLs studied were female and demonstrated openness to the risk of forming a land tenure relationship with a BFR, and NOLs did not highlight financial barriers as an obstacle to forming land tenure relationships with BFRs (Carolan, 2005; Mase et al., 2017; Petrzalka et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021). Research specifically targeting the influences of gender and finance on a NOL's propensity to work with a BFR is needed. Additional information in this area would improve third party supporters' ability to reach different demographics of landowners and better meet their needs with tailored educational and outreach materials.

More broadly, future research should examine how to most effectively reach NOLs for conversations and information about land tenure. Trusting extrafamilial land tenure relationships between NOLs and BFRs cannot develop if neither party is aware of the pathway in the first place. Landowners in general have previously been found to be a less engaged audience than BFRs when considering the extrafamilial transfer of their land, though this may be directly related to their access to accurate information (Carolan, 2005; Lu et al., 2022; Sawadgo et al., 2021; Valliant et al., 2019). Additional knowledge about how to connect this audience with information and tools supported by the framework for trust development could contribute to the prevalence of NOL/BFR relationships in agricultural land tenure.

Future research should also seek to explore how NOLs move through the emotionally fraught process of surrendering management of agricultural land to an extrafamilial party and the process of succession planning in general. While the stories shared through this research captured the processes some NOLs went through to reach the point of transitioning managerial control to a BFR, every relationship is unique and no prescriptive procedure was identified through this research. Deeper understanding of how this emotional process occurs in the real world could help to support the increasing number of landowners on the front edge of the Great Wealth Transfer to consider connecting with a BFR and successfully introducing and sustaining the next generation of agricultural stewards on our landscapes.

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Appendix A – IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Nellie Hill
Communications & Ag Education

Proposal Number: IRB-12376

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 10/02/2024

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Creating a Framework to Facilitate Land Management Relationships Between Non-Operating Landowners and Beginning Producers."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category: Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 10/02/2024 1:03 PM ET

Appendix B – IRB Approval, Modification



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Nellie Hill
Communications & Ag Education

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 10/21/2024

RE: Proposal #IRB-12376, entitled "Creating a Framework to Facilitate Land Management Relationships Between Non-Operating Landowners and Beginning Producers."

MODIFICATION OF IRB PROTOCOL #IRB-12376, ENTITLED, "Creating a Framework to Facilitate Land Management Relationships Between Non-Operating Landowners and Beginning Producers"

EXPIRATION DATE: Exempt

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) has reviewed and approved the request identified above as a modification of a previously approved protocol. **Please note that the original expiration remains the same.**

All approved IRB protocols are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced in-progress reviews may also be performed during the course of this approval period by a member of the University Research Compliance Office staff. Unanticipated adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB, and / or the URCO

It is important that your human subjects activity is consistent with submissions to funding / contract entities. It is your responsibility to initiate notification procedures to any funding / contract entity of any changes in your activity that affects the use of human subjects.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 10/21/2024 3:06 PM ET

Appendix C – Interview Instrument

Interview Guide for Land Link Coordinators

Thank you for meeting with me today. We will visit for forty-five minutes to an hour. The goal of our conversation is to understand your experiences as a land link coordinator and how you help to facilitate trusting relationships between non-related farmers and farm seekers.

For research purposes, I am going to record our discussion. This helps me compare responses and avoid misinterpretation. Your name will not be associated with any information reported or further research. It stays with the research team at Kansas State. All of your responses will remain confidential. If there is a question you prefer not to answer, please just say so. You may also stop the interview at any time.

Is it okay if I start recording?

Interviewee Background and Program Characteristics

First, I'd like to learn about you and how you came to this work.

1. Would you please describe your role as a land link coordinator?
2. What past experiences and personal interests led you to this role?

Next, I want to learn more about the land link program that you lead.

1. What are the goals of your program?
2. How is your program funded?
3. How are farmers and farm seekers linked through your program?
 - a. Have you ever facilitated relationship between a non-operator landowner and a potential tenant?
4. As a coordinator, what does your involvement in relationship formation look like throughout the connection process?
 - a. How long does each step in the connection process typically take?
 - b. How do you know when you no longer need to be involved in the relationship?
5. How does your program define success?
 - a. How does your program measure success?

Trust in land link relationships

Now that I understand more about how your program operates, I am interested in learning more about how you build trust between the parties who use your program.

1. When you reflect on successful relationships between farmers and farm seekers made through your program, what are the shared characteristics among these relationships?
2. What does a “trusting” relationship between a farmer and farm seeker mean to you?
3. Tell me about a specific relationship formed through your program that you feel best exemplifies trust built between non-related people (or people who aren’t family).
 - a. How did the two parties go about developing their relationship form over time?
 - b. What qualities of each party set the relationship up for success?
 - c. What did you/your program do well to contribute to the success of this relationship?

Limitations of land link programming

I have a few questions about the challenges you face in your work and the limitations of existing land link programs.

1. What are the most difficult challenges you encounter as you try to achieve the goals of your program?
 - a. What are the biggest challenges you face in facilitating trust between a farmer and a farm seeker?
 - i. What do you think are the root causes of those challenges to trust-building?

2. When you reflect on relationships that did not work out the way you/the involved parties hoped, what do you attribute to the relationship not developing successfully?
 - a. How did trust-building play a role in these examples?
 - b. What might have improved the outcome of the relationship?

Land link programming improvements

Now that we have discussed the successes and limitations of the programming you offer, I am interested in your thoughts on how to make your program more effective at building trust between non-related parties.

1. What tools or kinds of support would most benefit you in trying to facilitate trusting land link relationships?
2. What materials or kinds of support would be most helpful to landowners/farmers seeking to build trust with a beginning producer or tenant in a land link relationship?
 - a. To new and beginning farmers needing to build trust with a landowner/farmer?
3. What skills and practices do you think are important for a land link coordinator to have in building trust between non-related parties looking to enter a land link relationship?
 - a. What skills and practices do you think are important for farmers/landowners/farm seekers to have when they pursue a land link relationship?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. I am interested in learning about the experiences of participants in your program who have been successfully connected. Do you know of anyone who might be willing to participate in a short interview like this one, and would you be willing to put me in contact with them?

Appendix D – IRB Approval, Modification



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Nellie Hill
Communications & Ag Education

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 09/12/2025

RE: Proposal #IRB-12376, entitled "Creating a Framework to Facilitate Land Management Relationships Between Non-Operating Landowners and Beginning Producers."

MODIFICATION OF IRB PROTOCOL #IRB-12376, ENTITLED, "Creating a Framework to Facilitate Land Management Relationships Between Non-Operating Landowners and Beginning Producers"

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It is important that your human subjects activity is consistent with submissions to funding / contract entities. It is your responsibility to initiate notification procedures to any funding / contract entity of any changes in your activity that affects the use of human subjects.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 09/12/2025 11:21 AM ET

Appendix E – NOL Interview Instrument

Interview Guide for Non-Operator Landowners

Thank you for meeting with me today. We will visit for forty-five minutes to an hour. The goal of our conversation is to understand your experiences as a non-operator landowner and learn more about how you have formed a trusting relationship with your operator. We will go to significant lengths to anonymize any information you share. Your experiences will be used to help other landowners and their operators.

For research purposes, I am going to record our discussion. This helps me compare responses and avoid misinterpretation. Your name will not be associated with any information reported or further research. Your name stays with the research team at Kansas State. If there is a question you prefer not to answer, please just say so. You may also stop the interview at any time.

Is it okay if I start recording?

Landowner Background and Property History

The first few questions focus on the history of your land and your role as a landowner.

1. Please describe the history of your agricultural property.
 - a. How did you come to be the owner of your land? (e.g. by inheritance, purchase, etc.)
 - b. Have you had any prior agricultural production experience?
 - c. What have been the primary uses of your property up to this point?
 - d. What has land tenure looked like on your property prior to your contract with your current operator? (e.g. Did you/your family have a tenant? What sort of land tenure arrangement did you/your family have with the tenant?)
2. What motivates you as the owner of this property?
 - a. Why have you chosen to retain ownership of this property?
 - b. What does owning this piece of land mean to you?
 - c. What considerations are most important to you when thinking about the future of your property?
3. What did/does the succession planning process for your land look like?
4. What are the most significant challenges you face as a non-operator landowner?

Landowner and Operator Relationship

The next questions are about your relationship with the operator of your land.

1. Were you originally seeking to work with a beginning farmer or rancher to manage your property?
 - a. What led you to end up working with a beginning farmer or rancher?
 - b. Can you describe any feelings of interest or motivation in working with a beginning farmer or rancher?
2. What hesitations or concerns, if any, did you have about working with a beginning farmer or rancher to manage your property?
3. How did you and your operator initially connect with each other?
 - a. What considerations were most important to you when selecting this operator for your land?
 - b. What has the development of your relationship looked like over time?
4. How do you and your operator work together to successfully manage your property?
 - a. How do you collaborate to determine and achieve goals for your property?
 - b. What kind of lease agreement do you have?
 - i. What did the process of creating that agreement look like?
 - c. How do you communicate with each other?
 - i. How often do you check in with each other about questions, concerns, or ideas you might have?
5. What does a trusting relationship mean to you?
 - a. Where are you and your operator in your trust development process?
 - b. How have you and your operator worked together to build that trust over time?
 - c. What were some of the difficulties you faced as your relationship developed?
How did you overcome them?
 - d. What made it easier for you and your operator to build trust?

Existing Resources and Potential Improvements

The final set of questions are focused on the resources and support that have been most helpful for you as you have developed your relationship with your operator.

1. What people, educational resources, or programs have been most helpful for you as you have developed your relationship with your operator?
2. What educational resources or programs do you think are missing from existing tools to help non-operator landowners like you to find/work with operators for your properties?
3. What, if anything, do you wish you had known as a landowner about land tenure or agricultural land management before forming your relationship with your operator?

Conclusion

1. Ten years from now, what do you hope the management of your property will look like?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F – BFR Interview Instrument

Interview Guide for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

Thank you for meeting with me today. We will visit for forty-five minutes to an hour. The goal of our conversation is to understand your experiences as a beginning farmer or rancher, or someone who was a beginner when your relationship with your landowner began and learn more about how you have formed a trusting relationship with your landowner. We will go to significant lengths to anonymize any information you share. Your experiences will be used to help other early career farmers and ranchers and their landowners.

For research purposes, I am going to record our discussion. This helps me compare responses and avoid misinterpretation. Your name will not be associated with any information reported or further research. Your name stays with the research team at Kansas State. If there is a question you prefer not to answer, please just say so. You may also stop the interview at any time.

Is it okay if I start recording?

BFR Background

The first few questions focus on your experiences and personal history as a farmer or rancher.

1. Please describe what motivated you to become a farmer or rancher.
 - a. What experiences prepared you to become a farmer or rancher?
2. Please describe your current agricultural operation (e.g. crops, livestock, value-added products, etc.)

The next few questions are about your current production efforts and experiences as a beginning farmer/rancher. Remember that you don't have to answer every question, and we go to lengths to keep your words confidential. As I stated before, the research team takes confidentiality seriously, and we will take steps to protect your data. These questions help me to better understand your context and experience.

3. How much land do you have in production?
 - a. How much of that land do you own?
 - b. How much of that land do you lease or rent?
4. What are the biggest barriers or challenges you faced when starting your farm or ranch?
 - a. What are the biggest barriers or challenges you face running your farm or ranch now?
5. What has been your experience pursuing land access for your farm or ranch?

Landowner and Operator Relationship

The next questions are about your relationship with the operator of your land.

1. Were you originally seeking to work with a beginning farmer or rancher to manage your property?
 - a. What led you to end up working with a beginning farmer or rancher?
 - b. Can you describe any feelings of interest or motivation in working with a beginning farmer or rancher?
2. What hesitations or concerns, if any, did you have about working with a beginning farmer or rancher to manage your property?
3. How did you and your operator initially connect with each other?
 - a. What considerations were most important to you when selecting this operator for your land?
 - b. What has the development of your relationship looked like over time?
4. How do you and your operator work together to successfully manage your property?
 - a. How do you collaborate to determine and achieve goals for your property?
 - b. What kind of lease agreement do you have?
 - i. What did the process of creating that agreement look like?
 - c. How do you communicate with each other?
 - i. How often do you check in with each other about questions, concerns, or ideas you might have?
5. What does a trusting relationship mean to you?
 - a. Where are you and your operator in your trust development process?
 - b. How have you and your operator worked together to build that trust over time?
 - c. What were some of the difficulties you faced as your relationship developed? How did you overcome them?
 - d. What made it easier for you and your operator to build trust?

Existing Resources and Potential Improvements

2. What educational resources or programs do you think are missing from existing tools to help a farmer or rancher like you to find/work with landowners for your business?
3. What, if anything, do you wish you had known as a farmer or rancher about land tenure or agricultural land management before forming your relationship with your landowner?

Conclusion

1. Ten years from now, what do you hope your farm or ranch will look like?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add?