

Person-Centered Way to Keep Minnesota's Farming Culture Thriving

State of Minnesota: Minnesota IT Services

Category: Digital Services: Government to Business

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Executive Summary

Minnesota ranks in the [top five nationally in agricultural production](#) at \$16.7 billion. The state's agriculture industry exports \$7.1 billion of goods annually, and together agricultural production and processing industries generate more than \$112 billion annually in total economic impact, supporting more than 431,000 jobs.

To ensure the state can sustain this important industry and to build on the success of Minnesota farmers and ranchers, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) sought new ways to help them succeed as stewards of the land and create a new generation of farmers ready to continue the state's rich agricultural traditions. With over 70% of Minnesota's farmland set to change ownership in the next 20 years, MDA foresaw quite early the need to connect the next generation of emerging farmers looking for land with farmers on the verge of retirement.

Access to land is the primary barrier for young farmers, as reported in both the [Minnesota Emerging Farmers' Legislative Report](#) and the [National Young Farmers Coalition Survey](#). FarmLink programs exist around the country, with many including additional "wrap around" services like technical support and outreach to underserved communities, beyond listing available land.

Minnesota legislators saw the need to make access to affordable land for emerging farmers a priority as statewide farmland prices increased

almost 10% from 2020 to 2021. That led to an almost two-year project for Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) and MDA to transform the web application Minnesota [FarmLink](#) into a sophisticated information exchange that serves both small fruit and vegetable farms and large grain and livestock operations.

It connects people – helping beginning farmers scout land or farms for purchase or rent and helping them explore employment or mentorship opportunities with an experienced or retiring farmer. Users now can post, edit, and delete their listings, and visitors to the site also can browse the online listings without logging into an account. The program is now a legislatively funded tool to support land transition and intergenerational dialogue, the passing on of both land and knowledge. It helps the rural economy and strengthens Minnesota.

The updated Farmlink saves MDA time and resources, more than 700 staff hours a year that can be dedicated to working closely with Minnesota's farm community to prepare them for the future.

Why it matters: An updated self-service web app saves staff 700 hours a year and helps Minnesota farmers find farmland, employees, or employment, sustaining one of our state's most important industries.

Transition to a More Functional Web App

Over 70% of Minnesota's farmland is set to change ownership in the next 20 years. The way retiring farmers take care of their estates and succession plans will impact rural areas and their economies. It is critical for Minnesota farmers not to rely on chance, but to plan for a successful transfer of their legacy – their land and business to younger generations for the sake of all Minnesotans. In the absence of a proper transition plan, the land potentially could be sold to development, divided into less agriculturally viable parcels, or abandoned.

Retiring farmers are often burdened with tough choices as they deal with managing family dynamics and expectations, and practical issues of estate and gift taxes. Finding a worthy successor becomes important for individuals as well as the larger community.

The agriculture industry estimates that 68% of farmers do not have children who farm, and over one-half of them have not identified a successor. For every farmer under the age of 35, there are 6 over the age of 65, reports [FarmProgress](#).

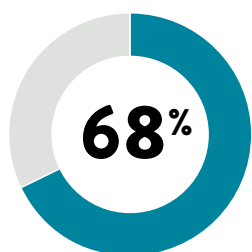
Data from the [2022 National Young Farmers Coalition Survey](#) show that 59% of young farmers named finding affordable land to buy as very or extremely challenging, and 45% of young farmers named finding available land to buy as very or extremely challenging. The rates were higher – 68% – among farmers of color. The state has 26 million acres of farmland (51% of total area); about

67,400 farms with an average size of 377 acres, [according to MDA](#).

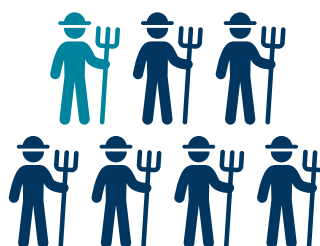
The usability of the old app became a concern for the Minnesota farm community. The original Minnesota Farmlink web application started more than a dozen years ago as a simple online listing service for land parcels belonging to farmers on the verge of retirement. It relied more on paperwork than technology. The program had no dedicated funding, relying on leftover funds from within MDA. Also, the designated FarmLink coordinator was assigned to use only 20% of their time on the program, most of which was working one-on-one with families transitioning or accessing land. The program was less about information exchange. The coordinator collected the information personally via email, mail, and phone calls and manually updated the system. The program was not self-serviceable.

As staff changed, the simple web application became increasingly difficult to modify since very few knew how it was developed. The platform that lacked official branding quickly became outdated. Many of the [program stakeholders](#) demanded more from FarmLink. They wanted information about opportunities in agricultural employment, mentorship, and access to land to rent or own.

It was ultimately left to MNIT staff to upgrade and improve the Minnesota Farmlink app.



Percentage of farmers do not have children who farm



For every farmer under age 35, there are 6 over the age of 65

What is Minnesota FarmLink?

FarmLink is a free, online program that helps connect:



Retiring farmers and new farmers



Buyers and sellers



Renters and landlords



Employers and employees

How it works

[Visit the website](#) to:

- Post and view job opportunities and potential employee credentials.
- List and research farms and farmland for rent or sale.
- Create an online account to add, edit, or delete listings.
- Respond to opportunities.
- Exchange contact information with other people.

The site also provides information about other resources including access to transfer and succession advisory teams for help with designing a business transition advisory team.

Improved Functionality

The updated FarmLink web application is now self-serviceable. It allows farmers to enter, edit, and delete their listings. They can specifically share what they want at the time they choose and respond to opportunities to exchange contact information as they please. The self-service options allow the FarmLink coordinator to have more time to work with individuals who may not be comfortable with computer technology.

The Minnesota FarmLink website is also accessible, incorporating WCAG 2.0 standards.

- Farmers can post job opportunities and mentorships, along with the ability to seek workforce applicants and review the information themselves.
- Farmers have more control over the information exchange process.
- The intervention of the FarmLink coordinator can be arranged as needed.

Implementing the Project

Upgrading FarmLink took almost two years. Developers worked to provide privacy to farmers while making data available seamlessly to a larger pool of users. MNIT and MDA used documented user comments from previous versions of the website to develop parameters for the upgrade.

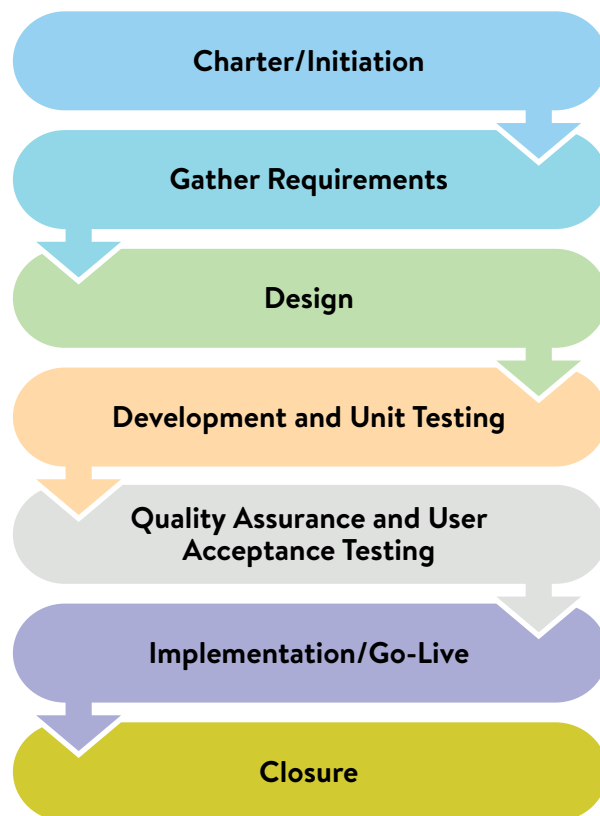
To make the website user-friendly and accessible, developers used wireframes, a two-dimensional illustration of a page's interface that specifically focuses on space allocation and prioritization of content, functionalities available, and intended behaviors for the new Farmlink website.

The project overcame several hurdles along the way:

- MNIT and MDA had to change the project schedule, efforts, and budget after gathering requirements gathering in the design phase.
- Staffing changes, change requests by the app development team to complete coding/unit testing and accessibility requirements, and finalizing an accessible design also affected the project schedule as did the additional oversight to mitigate risk.

Effective communication among project teams helped brainstorm new and workable ideas to solve technical issues. The project was completed as one effort following standard SDLC methodology using an iterative approach with some aspects of Agile.

Project Phases:



The testing group included MNIT's development team, quality assurance team, accessibility coordinator, MDA staff, and external farm groups such as Renewing the Countryside, Minnesota Farm Bureau, Minnesota Dairy Initiative, and Minnesota Milk Producers Association.

The external user acceptance testers went through onboarding to make sure they understood the process to provide actionable feedback. Developers made improvements based on the feedback and worked with stakeholders to figure out what was necessary to include, and what was desirable. They took into account budgetary considerations before accommodating tester requests.



Impact

The new web app is secure and ensures confidentiality for users. They can search/filter functions by geography and property characteristics. Email alerts for auto-expire and renewal of postings and profiles have taken care of complaints of outdated postings on the website. The updated system sends automatic emails to users reminding them to reactivate their accounts after a certain number of days. It helps to keep the listings current.

The improved app also has reduced the burden of data entry for the FarmLink coordinator – it saves them over 700 hours a year in data entry and electronic communications. The updated app allows the coordinator to send emails to all or selected users, shows time stamps of communications, and provides admin privileges. The hybrid system makes the system more accessible to potential users.

Fixing bugs in the app is simple as well.

MDA received dozens of phone calls and emails from happy users and the Minnesota Farmlink web upgrade garnered a lot of media coverage.

- In October 2022 AgWeek reported on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s [updated website](#), calling Farmlink a useful tool for farmers considering retirement and interested in passing their legacy to others. The article quoted Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen: “We know from our work with Emerging Farmers that access to land is a key hurdle to getting more farmers into agriculture, so anything we can do to reduce that barrier will help our state.”
- [Twin Cities KARE11](#) and more recently [Red River Farm Network](#) also covered the Minnesota FarmLink story.

Livestock Specialist Jim Ostlie says this program has grown since its inception and is available to anyone. **“The web application is self-serviceable. The public can view all the listings without private contact information. You’re not getting any cold calls and you have the opportunity to review the information before someone contacts you.”** Land access has become a challenge and this tool can help people navigate through the process of finding farmland, employees, or employment.

The Impact of Farm Planning

Farm legacy is the main goal of FarmLink. Agriculture and farming take on many forms and FarmLink was designed to include all of them. The more farms and farm products Minnesota produce, the stronger our economy will be and the stronger our rural areas will be.

The vision of FarmLink is to be the location to list anything farm-related. When more funding is available, MDA and MNIT will focus on adding mapping features and a module to allow people wanting to rent or purchase land to create a listing. This will help current landowners that want to give a beginning or emerging farmer in their area a chance to get their foot in the door. They would be able to visit the website and see if there is anyone in their area seeking land to rent or purchase and contact them first before the rental or sale of the land is made public.

Ned & Darrin

Darrin (32) and Ned (67) started exploring farm transfer options because Darrin wanted to dairy farm and Ned wanted the dairy to continue even though his own children were not interested in taking over. Darrin moved into a trailer house on the property. He started out working for a salary but also had the option to buy cows, buildings, and, eventually, land. As time passed, their relationship progressed from employer/employee to more of a partnership. By the time Ned was ready to retire, Darrin was in a financial position to buy the rest of Ned's farm business. Before and while working with Darrin, Ned consulted his accountant, lawyer, and other advisors to ensure he and his family would be protected in retirement. This planning paid off, and now Darrin is a new generation on the farm – just as Ned had hoped would happen.

