Dear TLC community members,

Lisa Bralts-Kelly
Vice President, The Land Connection

As I write this in very late April, the trees are flowering and the grass is rapidly greening up in central Illinois. I imagine that’s happening where you live, too. But something’s missing from the spring landscape: Farmers planting crops for harvest in the fall.

Things being this slow this late in the spring due to weather is hardly unheard of, but it’s getting a little close for comfort. It’s not late, my friend Karen Linder, whose family farms in Onarga, IL, told me recently. But we’re getting antsy.

Climate change and its broad effect on weather, pollinators, invasive species, and the like are not the only current events making farmers antsy in 2022. Supply chain problems continue due to the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing war in Ukraine threatens the food security of millions and millions of people, and its ripple effects could be deeply felt worldwide. Inflation, the sharply rising price of fuel and fertilizer—all of these issues and more are contributing significantly to pressure on our global food system.

There’s no doubt about it. Change is in the air, and time is of the essence! The Land Connection strives, every day, to respond to the transformational reality of current events, and you’ll see evidence of that in the report following this note. Your support of our work has been, and will continue to be, absolutely vital as we manage the ambiguity of the times and rise to as many occasions as possible. We hope the relationship continues… and deepens.

Lisa Bralts-Kelly
Vice President, The Land Connection
FARMERS MARKETS

2021 BY THE NUMBERS:

• Serves an average 800-1,200 shoppers each week
• Provides a sales outlet for 90+ farmers, food businesses, and artisans
• Infuses nearly $5,000 a week into our local economy—with sales reaching as high as $17,000 a week in the peak of the season!

The Land Connection works hard to ensure our neighbors have year-round access to fresh, nutritious, local food through the Champaign Farmers Market and Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market.

TLC’s markets highlight the bounty of food produced right here in central Illinois, meaning your food doesn’t have to travel far from the field to your supper plate. In addition to connecting farmers and eaters, the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets serve as a hub for TLC’s food access and food education work.

Looking ahead, TLC is aiming to grow the number of food vendors at the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets, offer more community programming (from yoga to a Kids Corner), and get more people the nutrition assistance they deserve.

Ricky Niester started Diamond’s Homestead in 2018 with the goal of growing healthy, affordable food for everyone throughout central Illinois. After just a few seasons of selling at the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets, as well as markets in Bloomington and Springfield, Ricky’s business is thriving.

What started with a cardboard, handwritten sign at his market booth has flourished into a staple stop for shoppers hooked on his microgreens.

Diamond’s Homestead sells out almost every week! You can even find Diamond’s Homestead products in restaurants and select grocery stores around central Illinois.

Stay up-to-date with Champaign-Urbana Farmers Market happenings all year long!

Pictured: Eric Zarnesky runs Diamond’s Homestead’s booth at the Champaign Farmers Market.
Access to nutritious food is a basic human right. The Land Connection centers consumer choice, empowering SNAP shoppers by expanding their food budgets and giving them more opportunity to buy locally-grown produce, meat, dairy, bread, and other staples.

The Universal Link Program provides people with up to $80 each week to spend on eligible items at the Champaign Farmers Market, Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market, Urbana Market at the Square, and Common Ground Food Co-op.

In 2022, The Land Connection plans to expand this program to serve at least 5 more farmers markets in central Illinois—with more possible based on the needs of the community.

In 2021, The Land Connection spent:

- $42,000 matching LINK benefits
- $15,000 supporting WIC and Senior food benefits
- Served 250 individuals or families each week

Shawna’s kids understand more about where their food comes from and who is growing it. They’ve gotten to know many of the regular vendors. They enjoy the freedom of taking chances on unfamiliar vegetables. They’ve even been able to buy plants for their home garden!

Donations to The Land Connection help set the table for food insecure households in our community!

FOOD ACCESS

Trying to shop for fresh, nutritious food that aligns with your values while still being affordable can feel like a balancing act—especially for parents, like Shawna Davian den Otter.

The Universal LINK Match program has helped Shawna stretch her family’s food budget and shop at local farmers markets more often, stocking up on higher quality and ostensibly healthier food.
KIDS KITS

Eating habits start young. But ensuring your kids get the nutrients they need can feel overwhelming. Kids Kits can help connect the dots.

Each month, The Land Connection supplies families with free take-home kits containing all the ingredients they need for a light meal or snack chock full of nutritious, local foods. These kits do more than help keep bellies full—they get kids to try new things, they help teach eaters about where their food comes from, and they bring families together around their kitchen table. Each kit comes with a recipe card to add to the parents’ arsenal, as well as a tutorial video that showcases the farm where the food was produced and teaches kids new kitchen skills.

Last year, TLC distributed 600 free Kids Kits and paid local farmers $5,500 for ingredients!

Learn more about Kids Kits and how you can support this awesome program!

NEIGHBORFOOD BUCKS

The COVID-19 pandemic hit everyone hard. Some found themselves struggling to pay for groceries for the first time, yet were unable to receive federal nutrition assistance because of their household income. Others were unable to successfully apply because of difficulty obtaining required documents and navigating through an unfamiliar system.

Recognizing these challenges, The Land Connection launched a no-questions-asked voucher program called NeighborFood Bucks to ensure that no one who came to the Champaign Farmers Market in need of food left empty handed.

In just over a month of running the program, TLC distributed nearly 750 NeighborFood Buck tokens, each accounting for $1 to spend on fresh, local produce and meat. Those tokens supplied food for more than 100 people in the Champaign-Urbana community.

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Two main principles guided The Land Connection’s farmer training programming in 2021: collaboration and communion. After a year apart, new and established farmers alike were hungry for connection with others tending to the land—to learn, to share successes, to troubleshoot, and to commiserate.

Take Farm Dreams, an online workshop series for aspiring farmers to discover what it would really take to start a farm business. The program, hosted in partnership with Food Works and Angelic Organics Learning Center, produced a waiting list for attendance.

For farmers looking to grow their business’s online presence as consumers’ shopping habits shift more and more toward the worldwide web, TLC offered a series of webinars on e-commerce platforms and strategies. And learning shifted away from the computer screen for nearly the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In-person field days returned in the late summer, with the IDEA Farm Network’s Tillage Tailgate and the Embarrass Grazing Partnership’s Regenerative Grazing Field Day bringing together farmers, researchers, and technical service providers to share their knowledge and experience on farm again—finally!

2021 BY THE NUMBERS:

- 35+ farmer training activities held in 2021
- 1,500+ farmers received direct training or services
- 1,400+ connected with the resources they need to grow and thrive

When Anna Thomson and her sister, Laura, of Joyful Wren Farm—fifth generation farmers growing vegetables and raising laying hens on their family land—were starting to ramp up production, they had a question about the finer points of sales tax. After unsuccessfully putting the question to Google, they decided to reach out to The Land Connection for help. That single email not only got Anna and Laura an answer, it led them into TLC’s deeply rooted farmer community. Through the relationships they developed, the sisters got connected with other farmers doing interesting work locally.

This sense of network and connection has made all the difference for Anna and Laura, who returned to their homestead after a decade in the Pacific Northwest. Their family’s farming knowledge had been lost as previous generations left farming or passed away. The connections offered by TLC’s staff and programs mean that farmers don’t need to feel like they are going it alone.
The availability and cost of land are the biggest hurdles, along with a lack of skills in putting together all the pieces. Then comes the question of soil quality, infrastructure needs, and finding a place to call home—all while competing against better-resourced farming conglomerates and developers.

Even those who are part of established farming families say the system is stacked against them.

Most aspiring farmers work as extra help on existing farms for several years before having the opportunity to start farming on their own. Still, that experience doesn’t always connect them with the network and resources they need to pursue their own farming enterprises.

Over the past year, The Land Connection has been bringing folks together and building momentum for the Illinois Farmland Access Initiative. Beginning farmer “listening sessions” held across the state allowed partners to learn directly from farmers what they need in order to thrive on Illinois soil.

But this is only the beginning. TLC will continue to connect and mobilize organizations and individuals across our state—from nonprofits to agricultural service agencies to direct technical service providers—forming a robust and user-friendly Illinois Farmland Access Hub.

In the coming years, TLC will deploy Farmland Access Navigators across the state to work one-on-one with farmland owners and farmland seekers in their land transfer journey.

These efforts will culminate in a statewide expansion of the Illinois Farm Link website to serve the entire state, helping farmland owners and farmland seekers find their perfect match.
None of the work we do at The Land Connection is possible without the tireless efforts of others working to strengthen the local food system and grow more resilient communities.

We’d like to thank the following organizations for their support of TLC’s work. This list is not exhaustive and is presented in alphabetical order.

- American Farmland Trust
- Artisan Grain Collaborative
- Buy Black Chambana
- Buy Fresh Buy Local Illinois
- Champaign Center Partnership
- Chicago Food Policy Action Council
- City of Champaign
- City of Urbana
- Common Ground Food Co-op
- Embarras Grazing Partnership
- Experimental Station
- Farm Beginnings Collaborative
- Food Works
- Healthy Champaign County
- IDEA Farm Network
- Illinois Environmental Council
- Illinois Farm Bureau
- Illinois Farmers Market Association
- Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT
- Land for Good
- Liberty Prairie Foundation
- Lincoln Square Mall
- MarketMaker and ConnectFresh Collaborative
- Midwest Grazing Exchange
- Organic Agronomy Training Service (OATS)
- ReGenerate Illinois
- Routes to Farm Alliance
- Savanna Institute
- Smile Politely
- The Conservation Fund
- University of Illinois Extension
JOIN THE MOVEMENT!
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www.thelandconnection.org/donate

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