

National Shared Land Case Study
Interview with Sarah from Osamequin Farm, Seekonk, RI
Edited for clarity

Question (Tamar):

How did the farm and the nonprofit get started like who was involved?

Question (Colleen):

Just to jump in. Specifically, we're interested in the Cooperative Farm. I know you all have lots of components. So just wanted to clarify that.

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah. So this property is privately owned. It continues to be privately owned by the Jencks family, and they were about to become... the people I work with who are brothers were about to become the owning generation. ~~They, their mom, was not doing well, and was gonna pass, you know, pretty soon.~~ And so that sort of triggered them to be like, what are we gonna do with this property? It had been sort of like a family summer home, basically and then one of the brothers that I work with did raise his kids here. But they didn't grow up on the property. They grew up sort of visiting. and so I think there was sort of a narrative of like, It's a really big piece of property. It's a lot to manage like nobody has really been able to sort of over the years their family had owned it since about the 1920s or 30s, I think.

And it's sort of been a conundrum kind of over time of like, what are we gonna, you know, who's gonna manage this? Because it's a big piece of land. It's about 500 acres.

And I was a vegetable farmer coincidentally around the corner leasing land from just private landowners in Seekonk. And so the owner, one of the brothers at the farm, just like, walked over to our farm where I was and was like, we've got this farm like we think maybe we want somebody to farm it like we don't know, really. Do you want to come see it? And I was an organizer, continue to be, but was at the time an organizer for the Young Farmer Network and pretty steeped in like land access issues. It's you know, it's huge in Rhode Island. It's a lot of what we worked on and talked about. So I went to tour the place with that perspective, not thinking that I would be involved really, but as a just sort of coordinator of like connecting people to people.

But then, when I actually saw the place and how it was laid out, and what it had to offer. I was like, I really think that what you want is multiple farmers. I don't think it makes sense to put one farmer on this place. I, personally couldn't really imagine how I, as one farmer, would manage such a place. I mean, it's certainly not 500 acres of fields, but there's about maybe 20 acres of fields between 5 different sort of disparate places, and that to me really triggered like, oh, these sort of like 2 to 5 acre disparate parcels to me really says like shared land use and also coming from being a sort of like, you know, very scrappy young vegetable farmer, I was really hyper aware of just how costly all of the infrastructure is, and you know we had like saved our pennies to build ourselves a

cool bot, and we were sort of like using kind of like a ramshackle, like, leanto as our like storage area. And so then I got to this farm with this like historic 1700s, post and beam barn, and like all these things that to me, just felt like, you know, were so far ahead already to start over here.

And so I just saw a lot of potential for hosting many farmers, because I was so sort of immersed in, just like the story of young farmers not being able to find land. So I basically worked with the brothers over the course of maybe 6 months or so to sort of develop this idea of instead of them putting out an RFP for a farmer instead figuring out how to form a nonprofit, you know, found a nonprofit and use that entity to manage because they were not, they knew that they were not interested in managing. They were willing to sort of lease to one farmer, but beyond that they were just, you know, they've got jobs. They were like, not interested.

So then I basically pitched them this idea where, like I would, that was like, hire me. I will you know, manage the shared land use model, and I'll also do these other things. You know. We'll have an education arm. We'll have a community arm, whatever. And they were like, Great. Let's do that. So then we just basically, you know, dug through the NIFTI database and met with a lot of other people who are sort of in the world is particularly in Rhode Island, and just talking to other people who had done similar things, working with Land for Good, got a lawyer through the Conservation Law Foundation and just started pulling pieces together to figure out, you know, what do we need to do before we bring farmers onto the land?

And I mean, I can keep going forever. Do you want me to keep going in this story, or do you want to ask me a different question?

Question (Tamar):

Yeah, I think keep going. I guess it would be helpful to hear how you landed on this like nonprofit structure and how you found the farmers that you did.

Answer (Sarah):

To be honest, I don't think we really considered many other legal structures. I think we were just kind of like, this sounds like a nonprofit. It feels like that's what it should be. And that made sense to us. So Andrew, who's one of the owners, is very involved and has been for decades with the local Land Trust and that's a nonprofit. And so I think that was just sort of like our familiarity was like, I think, we can make this a nonprofit. And we did work with someone who I don't think her business exists anymore, but she basically like helps people apply for their 501(c)(3). And we worked with her to do that because we didn't know really how to do that.

But what was, I just gonna explain, oh, how we found a farmer. So so yeah, we basically like, we work with the Legal Food Hub and lawyers through that organization to, you know, draft up a master lease between the landowners. So it's like a little convoluted, as

everything is. You know, the brothers own the land. Most of it is in a trust, and the trust is just the 2 of them, and then they individually own other pieces of it. So like one of them owns one of the houses. One of them owns another house, and then the trust basically owns the rest of it. So we technically only lease from the trust. We lease everything except for the houses, but in practice, the barn that we do a lot of activities at, and that we use for some storage is technically part of Andrew's house lot. So there are... And similarly, our wash station is built technically on Stephen's house lot. So there's some like gray area. But technically we are leasing from the trust.

And so we wrote a 10-year lease for... between the nonprofit and the trust and then we had a lawyer also help us draft subleases between the nonprofit and farmers. And those are...

They can be as small as one year up to 5 years is how those are designed and you know, we spent quite a bit of time, and I think, and have since actually spent some time attempting to revise, and then like, never completed, and need to go back and revise that master lease, because a lot of it was based on suggestions from Land for Good. And you know, example leases that we could find from other organizations. But there's a lot that we wrote in there that I think we're now, you know, 6 or 7, 8 years in being like, oh, maybe that doesn't really make sense, or that's not really had his played out, or because there was a lot of sort of like, you know, it's really just trying to anticipate, like, what are the things gonna be that we run into? Who's in charge of maintenance on buildings? Who's responsible if we wanna take down trees, you know, who has to correspond with the organization? Most of our land is conserved by the Trustees of Reservations. So who's the point person with the trustees? And just all these sorts of little things that we tried to anticipate, and we did do a pretty good job anticipating what they would be. But we didn't do a very good job anticipating what in practice would make sense as answers to those questions. So I think we knew the questions to ask, and we didn't really know the answers. So we have some work to do, I think, Now, you know, approaching whatever we're at 8 years, 8 or something, to go back to our original, you know, founding documents and do some revisions.

Question (Colleen):

What are the biggest like things that in practice were different than assumptions When you wrote the master lease that others could learn from?

Answer (Sarah):

Totally. It's a lot about how things are shared. And this is a unique, I mean, I... anytime anyone asks me anything about this place, whether it's from your perspective or as a farmer whatever, I always just start out being like this is a weird situation, but every situation is weird. I have not yet run into one that I'm just like, oh! how clean cut like that's so simple, ABC. It feels like everyone's land story is something that's like a little bit messy in some way. So ours is certainly a little bit messy in that the owners live on the property and are involved somewhat in the day to day, sort of like happenings of the place, both on a personal level and also, like, as the, you know, maintaining of the farm.

I think some of the premise at the very, very beginning was like, Oh, we will, you know, lease the farm to this nonprofit that we're founding right now, and the nonprofit will like take over management of the property, and in practice, like, you know, I was the only employee for quite some time, and then we had, like 2 part-time people in the summer, you know, we're like inching our way up, so like we are nowhere near capacity to manage a huge historic farm, you know. That's just not where we're at. So they are still very involved in, you know, in a practical way. That when trees come down, they're out there with chainsaws and their tractor, you know, managing things like that. We're sharing mowing responsibilities, moving snow when it's in the winter and also making improvements. You know, when things like. For example, when we got a grant to build a greenhouse you know, technically, according to our lease, all we had to say was, Hey, we're putting up a greenhouse over here, Fyi. But in practice, you know, they were very involved in helping us decide where it's gonna go and what makes sense. And they're, you know, out there helping us build it. So I think we didn't know how involved they would continue to be, and that has both been like such a boon and also really challenging, because they are trying to come at it, you know, with 2 hats on, both, as like the owners of the property, who have, like a deep emotional investment in the place, and also, you know, as advocates for the organization. They're on the board. They've been on the board. They're going to start to rotate off, actually. But they've been on it since the beginning.

So yeah, just lots around sharing. How do we share the barn? What's reasonable? How do we manage when things are shared? You know, equipment? We're getting to a point where we're starting to have most of our own equipment as the nonprofit. But for a long time we were sort of using what was there.

And then questions of like, how do you know if maybe it's okay for us to borrow their tractor, is it then, okay, for the farmers who lease from us, from the nonprofit, to use the tractor? Or is that sort of a step too far, and a lot of just like needling of things like that. So a lot of sort of like upkeep infrastructure questions.

And then like boundaries. So like, you know, going into it. We were like, yeah, it's gonna be an education space, gonna be community space, we're gonna lease it to farmers. And I don't think anybody, including me, really thought about how many people that really meant were going to be occupying this space on a daily basis, because every farmer— some of our farmers are actually collectives of farmers, so that already is a lot of people, and then many of them have, you know, friends or work shares, or volunteers, or whatever. So on any given day. I mean, there can be aside from the people, the sheer number of cars that we're talking about can sometimes be something that comes up. So that was a big one was of sort of like, okay, well, it turns out that that you know that farmer who signed a lease is actually 9 different families, and when they all come on the same day, like, where are they going to park? We didn't think about that when we placed them in the field that we placed them in, you know. Had we thought about that, we might have put them in a different one that had better access, or things like that.

And, water. We did not anticipate how huge a hurdle water was going to be. Primarily, because half the property is wetlands, and we're like there's water here. We'll drill some new wells like no problem. And in practice we like did spend a lot of money to dig one new well that is actually like terrible. It gets like 3 gallons per minute, or something like that. We were able to put a new pump in an existing well, that does fine, but we're sending that water, I think it's 1,500 feet through blue flat line to get out to the field that it's powering. And then we're pumping out of like surface water gas pumps on other fields, because that's been the best way to get water. So there's like no shortage of just like irrigation woes. You know. There's wells running dry. There's, you know, holes. There's damage. There's people, you know, too many users trying to share one water source. Really, the full gamut of like, what could be an issue with water is things we're experiencing. And I don't think we thought that would be so much the case, and I don't think we realized how expensive it would be. The amount of money that we were gonna end up spending on just like what, you know, feels like a just a such a baseline thing to offer.

And when we, you know, before we brought farmers onto the property, we took a year or so, and that to me, felt like a long time. I was like, we're gonna take a year before we have farmers on here, and like. I mean, we could have taken 5 frankly, to get things organized enough. But that felt greedy or something. I don't know to not let people get in here.

But we started by just figuring out, how are we going to get water to each of these plots, and we cover cropped everything because it had been in hay for a long time. So everything got one year of cover crop and then figuring out what storage was gonna look like, which has also been a really big thing that we're still dealing with, is like we are always sort of trying to find the balance between. Like I feel like I am constantly advocating, for, like leaving the farmers alone is really my big thing, because I feel like we talked a big talk at the beginning of everything when we were finding our farmers about like this is not an Incubator Farm. We have no intention of kicking you off. We want you to put roots down here and and stay a part of the community, and you know. Build your business or build your whatever it's going to be. There's no requirement that they actually are running a business, but most of them are, and to me, with that needs to come a certain amount of trust.

And just respect for how they want to do things, you know, because it's not an incubator farm, because there is no expectation that we're teaching them how to farm.

To me that feels like we don't really get a say in how they are going to do things. I mean, they do have to sign a quite extensive document every year. That includes, you know you have to follow organic practices, you know. Please be mindful of your neighbors when you're managing your weeds. You know all sorts of, sort of common sense... things lots pulled from other organizations.

But when it comes to like, you know the use of plastic. It has come up a lot because we are on kind of a like scenic, you know, lots of like historic properties on this road. And most of our farmers are using no till practices, which, as we know, it often comes with a lot of plastic use. It's big tarps. It's landscape fabric and silage tarps. And I see that it's farming. That's what farming looks like to me, you know. But when people who think of farming as like cows and one picket fence see that they're like, why is all that garbage out there? There's like plastic blowing around everywhere. And I'm the one who's always just kind of like, listen, like, we can't say that we want you to like, treat the soil well and like be, you know, sustainable minded farmers, and then like, give them shit for having plastic in their field like we just can't do that.

So this is a long way of saying that, like storage and sort of like aesthetics is a big thing that comes up all the time. And we do sort of have. you know, certain expectations about how things are going to be kept. But we also want to be the ones who provide all of the storage because we want it to be uniform aesthetically, so like we provide them with a shed.

But there's so much more stuff that needs to go in than can fit in a shed. So then there's stuff piled all around the shed. And then it's like, Okay, well, we're going to give you like pallet bins you have to like put the stuff in the pallet bins. But it's sort of like a been a just a messy kind of like you know, we're telling you it's messy, but then we're not really like giving you any way to solve that frankly.

And we're really trying to figure out a where, based on our conservation restrictions, we could put a new building, and also how we would fund it, because we frankly just need, like another barn, or we're starting to consider, maybe even just like another greenhouse that we use as storage. Because there's so much stuff, you know. it's tarps. It's rock bags. It's row cover, stakes, you know. It's just like all the stuff that doesn't fit neatly into like a 10 by 16 square. So that's big for us. Yeah. That's one of the big things that we did not think about or couldn't have anticipated. I guess.

Question (Tamar):

You mentioned a lot of like really interesting things, some challenges in your last answer. But specifically about water and other shared equipment, and then also the shared storage. What else is like equipment or infrastructure is shared and available for the farmers?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah. So every farmer gets water to their field, but it might be shared. So there is, you know, lots of the water is being shared among multiple users from one source. Everyone gets their own storage shed, which, like, I said, is like 10 by 12, or something like that. And then they have they can share, we have a heated greenhouse, a wash station for washing produce, cold storage, tractor with a loader and a couple other

implements, a BCS. That's probably pretty much it. They can sell on the farm stand. We list that as an asset, I guess.

And then there's like miscellaneous, you know. They can like use the power tools in the workshop if they needed, and stuff like that. But those are like the things completely that they're sharing.

And there's a lot of opting in and out. So like, you know, they don't. Some of the farmers, the cold storage is not relevant for them, so they can opt out of the cold storage and not pay that part of the lease breakdown. Same with the greenhouse. Not everybody's interested in using the greenhouse. The tractor requires like a separate training, and they don't have... they can opt out of that. So there's a lot of choice built in.

Question (Tamar): I see. So in addition to them paying for the lease and the materials that they want to share, is there some sort of like Member due, or some sort of buy-in to be a part of the shared farm?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah. So the way we have it structured is that they are paying. Let's see if I can remember without pulling it up. I think it's It's a \$250... I'll send it to you, but it's a \$250, what we call facilities fee. Flat that everybody, no matter what size plot they're renting pays, and then everything else is like prorated by acreage. And so everything else is according to how much acreage you're leasing.

This is so embarrassing. So they pay \$400 per acre, and then they're paying \$250 for water per acre. And we did used to meter everybody's water. And there was actually a further breakdown that was like up to X gallons a year is this amount, and then beyond that maybe it's more. And the meters honestly were such a headache, and nobody in the first 2 years came even remotely close to that much water that I just stopped metering it altogether. So we don't track water usage anymore. And then the cold storage. They get an A 4 x 8. So basically 2 pallets is a unit of space in the cool bot, and they can have that, for I believe it's \$250 for the year.

The tractor fee is \$35 per tractor hour. So like it's tractor hours, not human hours. The BCS, I think, is \$15 a tractor hour.

And then the greenhouse is its whole own convoluted nightmare. Which every time I have to send it to someone who's interested in sharing our greenhouse. I'm like, I know, this is overly complicated, and I'm so sorry. But it's just like what we've decided is the most fair. So, they pay for the greenhouse in 2 different ways. They pay for the space in trimesters, so they can use it between... They can opt to in and out of seasons, right? Because not everybody uses all the time. So the you know, what we call seedling season is like January to June. And that's 1 unit of time. And then there's summer, which is really like curing. People use it for curing garlic, sweet potatoes, things like that. And then in the fall, it's basically seedling season again for people who are trying to do

that. So for renting space in the greenhouse. They're paying \$20 per like bow, like in the greenhouse. So it's a measure of space. And so it you know, people, If let's say somebody has like 3, you know, big greenhouse tables that they're growing seedlings on, they usually end up paying like 30 bucks, 40 bucks or something like that is the thing. And then, additionally, people are paying for the propane for the heating, because the heating is what's expensive of it. So the heating gets calculated weekly, and the weekly breakdown, whatever amount of propane we used in that week, whatever we got charged to refill the tanks gets divided proportionally by how much of the space each user is using. So if there's only 2 people using it the 1st week that we heat the greenhouse. They are going to split that propane cost 50/50. By the end of the seedling season in, you know, late April there's probably 10 different users, because we do lend our greenhouse to people outside the cooperative If we have enough space which we usually do. So then it gets broken down between 10 users.

So it's a lot of spreadsheet but it does... We have sort of just decided that that's like the fairest way to do it, especially because heating a greenhouse and paying for a heated greenhouse can get so costly. And we want to be really careful that we are giving the farmers all the information that they need to really make decisions about how they're going to grow, you know, because people have literally given that information to have been like, okay, maybe I'm going to buy onion sets instead of starting my own onions because I don't actually want to pay for those three really cold weeks of heating the greenhouse, If I'm going to be only one of 2 people doing it. That kind of decision.

Question (Tamar):

Yeah, interesting. And so you're meant you mentioned just that this was how you decided to do it. And I'm curious specifically about that decision, but also broadly, how are you making decisions between, Like the landowners, between the nonprofit, and then also the farmers who are sharing this farmland?

Answer (Sarah):

So let's see, we the.. how do we answer that? The landowners really only have a voice in operations insofar as they are board members. And the Board members don't really even have that much of a say. I mean, they have an opinion and they... you know, are in charge of me technically, but I think we're only really recently moving towards them, even being sort of like up to speed enough on everything that's happening that they could like have an informed decision to make about things like this.

So the short answer is, I make a lot of the decisions. But the more convoluted answer is that like we are really trying, and have been trying, I would say, for the last 3 years to empower the farmers to have more of a voice, specifically in things that really affect them, and also in things that they have complained about a lot. We have tried to be like, listen.

Let's be transparent, like, you know, we had to start somewhere. We are still young enough that we're just really trying. We're really coming out of like, we just had to start somewhere. And now we know more. And so if things need to change like, let's just figure out what needs to change, and then let's change it.

You know, I think we're...the growing pain of being still pretty young is that we are coming up against all the things that we didn't get quite right. But the blessing of it is that we're not really locked into any of them in any real way. You know, they're not so ingrained that we're sort of married to them, really. So we're really open to changing things.

And I think what we, I think, what naively we were kind of like. Oh, well, if things need to change, let's just like talk to the farmers about it, and then, like we'll change them, and actually like that requires quite a bit of mental energy on their part to like, really have that, engage in that like dialogue with us in a way that is gonna be fruitful. It's a lot of people also, you know, we have 9 farmers now. Some of them, like I've mentioned, are actually like cooperatives of their own. So it's a lot of users. We have language barriers that we're working with as well, and cultural barriers. So we're really trying, I mean to be totally frank, we've been like applying for funding like crazy to try and figure out like, how can we sort of take a year and like stipend our farmers to really take the time to sit with these questions, and bring in interpreters and bring in facilitators. And like, let's really look at our systems and figure out what's working and what's not working because we've been trying to sort of like, oh, we're gonna have a bi-monthly meeting, or we're gonna have a quarterly meeting. And we're gonna sort of like chip away at it. And it's just not enough time, really, to get people comfortable enough to really talk through like what doesn't feel like it's working, you know. It's almost like the first time you go see a therapist or something, and you're just like, well, I don't know like something's up like. You need a lot of time to get comfortable enough with the group of people, and to really, I think, wrap your head around like what even could change if that makes sense. Like, I think me coming to them being like, well, the systems aren't locked in like we could change them is just like too broad. Like we need... they need more specific directives than that to be able to sort of start to put their fingers on like what is feeling squeaky? And some things are obvious, you know. Some things are like, Oh, we set the tractor fee too high, and it makes people not want to use the tractor. So let's readjust the tractor fee, like, that's simple, and some of it is just more complicated. Like a lot of the boundary stuff, a lot of the aesthetic expectations.

You know, there have been different proposals about like, oh, maybe the you know, it's really the landowners who have the biggest opinion about that. So like, should the landowners have to sort of shoulder more of that burden? Should they have to do some of the cleanup, should they have to do some of the organizing? And then it's like, Well, I don't really want these random people like coming onto my farm and like tidying up for me, like, no, thank you.

So yeah, I mean, I think that really at its heart, it's...it is problem solving. But it's community building. So we all know that that just takes time. So we're trying to work

through. How do we do that? How do we not overstep in any direction? You know. How do we not ask too much of the farmers? Especially because, you know most of our farmers are not farming in the winter. They're taking other jobs in the winter, or they're, you know, doing other things. Some of them are going like to other countries and spending time with their family in the winter. So it really is growing season that we have to sort of work through some of these issues, and people are just tired, and they're hot. And they don't wanna like think about systems, you know.

So that's been a challenge is just sort of like, you know it's not a lack of interest on most people's part in sort of like making things better or streamlining or figuring out how we can communicate with each other better or anything like that. It's more just like people are beat. And, you know, there's always something we're never gonna find like a, you know, a 3 hour block where, like nobody's struggling with something else.

And that goes for our staff, too, you know, like we are a really small staff. This is the first year that we actually hired someone whose job it is to manage the farmer program. It was just my part of my job, prior, and I just don't have the time, you know. I'm doing too many other things and have time to dedicate to it. And I was feeling really badly about that that I just like, you know, I wished that I could actually just be kind of like out there, walking around like checking on people and popping into their fields and being like, how can I help? What can I do? What's going on? But I find that so much more effective than like these, scheduled bi-monthly meetings that we try to have but I am our only administrative staff.

So that's not practical that I can be doing that, and I certainly can't...I couldn't continue to be like also out there fixing irrigation when things were going wrong, and also like troubleshooting the pump in the greenhouse. And all these things that were falling to me. So that was a huge leap for us to actually just hire someone who is basically a facilities and farmer like coordinator person. So I'll be eager to see at the end of this year how much that has helped really to have sort of someone else. And even just for the farmers to have another person to go to that's not just me, because I think we've all known each other now for a couple of years, and some of the farmers who are here are people that I knew in my sort of prior life as a farmer. And I think it was getting to the point that they were kind of like, like, we know you're busy like, I don't really want to bother you, and like that's not good either. So you know, where, in terms of like, how do we manage this thing? How do we do it better? Like a lot of it on us as a nonprofit is like, how do we build our capacity enough to just have the staff energy, and physical hours to be dedicating what we want to dedicate to it? Cause there's a lot of work.

I also think I can't remember how the phrase at some point, but like another thing that we didn't really anticipate, or that has been a big challenge, is like, I don't think we thought about how much, just like actual facilities upkeep was going to affect the daily life of the farmers. I think we were kind of like, well, they'll be there in their fields, and then, like whatever we get around to, you know, elsewhere is whatever. But there's

actually so much common space and there's so much shared infrastructure and shared facilities.

And then also, there's plenty of stuff at each of their sites that's like, really not their problem, you know. If, like, the access road to their field is like getting rutted out like, that's just simply not their problem. That's our problem. So we find there's just a lot of facilities management that needs to happen. That again, we just like barely have the capacity to be staying on top of. So if anybody ever asked me if they should start a shared land use project, I would say, do you have 3 to 7 staff people who, you know want to help you manage that because it's just not as simple as I hope my farmers get along, because that is really what I worried about. I was like, Oh, I hope they like each other, and I hope they like I hope they like want to be neighbors, and, like, you know, share, cover crop seed when they have it, and like they do like each other, and they do share cover crop seed. But there's a lot of other things that go into it that I think I knew from talking to other, you know, from talking to folks at Southside Land trust in Providence and their shared land use projects, and from talking to people at Snake Den in Johnston, you know, those were all people that were sort of my peers and in my community. And so I did have some what I felt like were quite frank conversations with them before starting this about like, what are what am I not thinking about? And they did bring up all these things, and so I think I knew on some level. But I don't think I... think I had the scale of the puzzle pieces skewed in my brain, you know, going in, I think I I would draw the picture differently now in terms of just like what's gonna take up a lot of time.

Question (Colleen):

I just have a clarifying question because you said 9 farmers. But some cooperatives. Is it 9 farms or 9 farmers and a certain number of...

Answer (Sarah):

9 farms, and then one, two. I guess just 2 of them are actually groups of people. So like, I have 9 leases with 9 different entities, and 2 of those 9 are actually groups themselves. So like one of one of them is like the Pokanoket tribe, and they are like working it out amongst themselves. And then one of them is the Sin Fronteras cooperative, which is actually like many families. And it changes year to year. So there's like one leaseholder who's been with me forever. Since the beginning, and then she sort of manages on her own who they don't... They're not like paying. We do have a clause that you can't like make money on your lease, so they're not allowed to like sublease and like charge more than they're paying but they are welcome to sort of manage on their own a sub lease situation as long as they're just sort of like using that. Either they're covering the fees or they're using that to sort of make rent but not like making money on it.

So I think that's true. Yeah, I think that's the situation.

Question (Colleen):

Do you have like an estimate of the total number of farmers? I know it changes yearly.

Answer (Sarah):

I could do it. Let's see, that's 1, 2, 3, 4. It's probably like 30 I would say individual people. If I tried to get them all in a room to be like you are all stakeholders. Let's talk about this. I'd say it's probably about 30 people.

Question (Tamar):

So what has been the process of people or farm entities coming to join the farm besides signing a lease?

Answer (Sarah):

Totally. So it used to be really informal. This is the first year, actually, that we officially formalized it. And that was mostly because we had almost no turnover from the very beginning. So in the very beginning it was really just word of mouth like I... We like meant to have a formal process. And then so many people came, heard that we were starting something, and came to me that we kind of almost just didn't even get a chance. It was just like people being like I heard, there's land I heard this land. I heard there's land like literally and so then we let them have land. Basically, it was like, you know, someone that was a good friend of mine was getting kicked off of their also shared land use situation, and was like complicated. She needed a place to land. I was like great. You're going to be one of the farmers. And then there was like Hmong family who were also growing at that place that was dissolving. And so then they came over, and then a friend who had been working for another farmer for years was sort of like ready to go out on his own, and he ended up coming over. It was a lot of that. It was just kind of like people just sort of landing in our laps. We did try to have sort of like a not quite an interview more of like a meet and greet situation, where they would sort of like, come and meet, talk with me and talk with the landowners, make sure everybody sort of like knew each other's face. And then, after a couple of those, we were like, I don't really think this is helping us. So we stopped doing that. So we very quickly had 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 in year one, or year 2, actually.

And then there was some turnover, but it was mostly kind of internal. So, like, you know, one of the farmers that we signed with decided to go to nursing school. She sold her business to another farmer, who then took over the lease. That Hmong family who was one of our original growers, she ended up sort of like sharing her lease out with other members of her community. And then she ended up leaving, and then each of those sort of took on their own leases. There's been some change, but not really any, for a while. Up to this year, only one instance of someone being like I'm leaving, and then, us being like we're gonna replace you with a new grower. And in that case, we actually didn't replace them with a new grower. We were just like great, 1 less person in the puzzle. We're gonna cover crop that for a minute and like reset. So then, this year was the first time we had one person tell us they were leaving. And another person wanted to downsize and so we were like, okay, it's time.

So we wrote, basically what I'm referring to as an intake form. It's not really an application. It's more just trying to capture, and I'm happy to send you this as well, it's basically like, what's your experience? You know, Where are you coming from? What scale have you been growing on? Do you have experience with equipment? Or... you know, what... How much of a shift is this? How much space are you looking for? Do you want that space in year one or are you trying to grow into that amount of space? How long are you trying to stay, Are you thinking? Have you been a home gardener? And you want to try growing on a quarter of an acre? Or have you been working on a 20 acre farm? And you want your own 2 acres to like hit the ground running. So those kinds of questions. And then we really, really agonized over like do we include demographic questions like, do we include financial questions like, what... Where is the line here? You know, we had a lot of conversations about like, what are we gonna do with that information? Is that information that we need, or we just like want it for, like being able to apply to grants? Like, what is the line here?

And where we landed was, we wrote a question that basically just says, like, Tell us your land access story like, explain to us, what have you... What have you been doing? What has your been your experience trying to find land? And what brings you here? Basically. And what specifically makes you interested in shared land.

Because we're really trying as we sort of enter this new phase to end up with people who are choosing shared land, who aren't just coming here because it there happens to be land available, and it's convenient. We want people who are choosing the shared model specifically because it's very different than just land somewhere else.

And so we're trying to start to get at that. So this basically, this intake form has, like a bunch of open ended questions, a couple sort of like checkboxy things. And then there's an option to say, like, you know, this did not allow me to tell my full story. Please call me and then we basically just say, like, we'll be in touch like, we'll keep this on file. We'll be in touch. People can submit that form anytime, and we'll just kind of hang on to it.

And then we ended up signing on 2 new farmers this year. One of them was a staff member who was like, I kind of want to start my own thing. Can I grow in like 10 of the rows? And that coincided with us, being like we're gonna downsize how much space we are growing. So I was just gonna cover crop it. And I was like, great. You've been managing those 10 rows, anyway. Now they're yours, go for it. So she became a farmer. So we do have now a little bit of a precedent of like in former employees getting kind of fast-tracked which we justify by being basically like the hardest part about onboarding someone is acclimating them to all of the sort of nuance of this place, and so, if we have an opportunity to give someone... to get someone on land, and they've already done that whole thing, then that's worth it for us in terms of how much energy we have to expend sort of like onboarding somebody.

The other person that started this year is actually a landscaper, and he's trying to grow...wait, do you know, guys know this person? Bryan, who runs bold meadows? Okay? So, Bryan landed here because he moved and he was looking for land. And from our perspective we're super at capacity for how many vegetable farmers we can have right now, because we do not have any more cold storage space, and we really need a new wash-pack and we're frankly pretty maxed out on our greenhouse as well, so we're in a place where, like we have more space, technically, we have more field space. We have lots of forest. If somebody wanted to like bring goats here, or something. We have lots of space in some ways.

But our capacity to hold more of the same kind of farmer that all need the same tractor implements at the same time, they need the same facilities at the same time. Their stress moments are the same time, we really do not have any more capacity for that.

So, Bryan, coming to us and saying, You know I'm looking for land, and I'm just growing native grasses, and I have like a couple of plugs. We were like fantastic! You know, that actually solves a problem for us. Because I was kind of like, how are we gonna not put another farmer on these parcels that are now open.

Given that we have a, you know, folder, full of people who want land, but we simply do not... You know, I don't feel good about bringing another vegetable farmer in and not having cold storage for them. So Bryan really solved that problem for us because we were like, Okay, here's an opportunity to get another farmer into the cooperative. He comes with a skilled background. He has an established business, but he's not gonna use the exact same resources as everyone else so from really that experience of kind of really trying to fast track Bryan and get him on the land. We wrote our sort of like scoring criteria...That's not quite right. We didn't write it because of Bryan, but it coincided in a way that really informed how we wrote the criteria, because it was starting to be written prior to meeting Bryan in a much more sort of like. Is the farmer a good fit, whatever? And then we actually really shifted it to be more like are we a good fit like, are we going to be able to meet this person's needs in a way that makes this a sustainable choice for them? Because, like I said before, like we really want people to stay like it's disruptive to the community to have people coming in and out all the time. It's better for us if we can bring farmers in who are interested, you know, if things change whatever, if you want to leave. That's fine. But we don't want the plan to be that they're going to come in and then leave, and someone's going to replace them because it's disruptive. So we really changed sort of our scoring scoring rubric for lack of a better term to be more about like are there needs aligned with what we have available right now? Like, do we have the resources, looking out the next couple of years, to meet this person's needs? And if not, you know, what can we tell them? Can we say like, we can't take you on right now, but we think we could probably fit you in in a few years. Or is it just like, no, I'm sorry this is not going to be a good fit for you.

Because, yeah, I mean, we're we... Through our growing pains, we've realized that just like, you know, we are a great fit for some people and not for everyone. And there's

limited space. And we'd rather, if things are gonna change, we want to start moving in a direction of just like, let's find the people for whom this is the right answer, and try. And, you know, build a cohort of those people who, for whom this makes the most sense.

Question (Colleen):

Touching on these stress points, where you have like 10 vegetable farmers, and they all sort of need the same things at the same time. What do their markets look like? and how you mentioned the farm stand, and that's collective?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, but it's a very small part of what they're doing. I mean, we really only push the farm stand during our pick your own blueberry season. Because there's kind of people here already, so it's like They might as well be able to buy vegetables. It's not a big enough space like we're really consistent enough to be helpful in other ways. So anyway, they're primarily CSAs. A lot of CSA farms. A lot of people working with Farm Fresh, the market mobile program, which is just an aggregator. And then the Sin Fronteras collective, and the one of the Hmong families are growing primarily like for their own cultural community. So they're either bringing it to church or they're sharing within the community. I think that one of our growers does go to like one farmers market. But we're really not a farmers market crowd. People seem not into it. Which, no judgment from me. Not a farmers market girl myself. And how else? Yeah. A lot of CSAs, some flower CSAs, vegetable CSAs, mixed CSAs, and then... and we have one person who has, like an herbal products business. So she does sell those for the farm stand, and then at some other places, but mostly CSA.

Question (Caitlin):

And our customers able to go on to the farm to pick up?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah. They all host one pickup at the farm, and then another pickup somewhere in Providence. And they're all selling out their CSAs. I think there was like a little bit of concern as there would be that like, you know, it's so many farms, and like they're all doing the same thing, but like they really seem to have just kind of found different communities.

And I feel like I mean, I used to run a vegetable farm CSA in Providence, and when I was doing it, which was, you know, 12 or 13 years ago, or something, I feel like there was a thousand of them. It was like you could not turn left without hitting somebody else's CSA pickup, and I think a lot of them have transitioned to wholesale, or have, you know, sort of gone a different direction. So there is...there's not quite the glut of CSA offerings as there was a couple of years ago. So there seems to be a lot of demand.

Question (Tamar):

Interesting, and going back to what you were talking about... about, whether the farmers are the right fit, or whether the shared farm itself is the right fit for the farmers.

What other values or visions do members of the farm share? And what are you looking for?

Answer (Sarah):

And it's not really fair for *me* to say, like, I want people to want to cooperate. But like that is kind of what it is. And that's like, it's hard to make somebody sign something that says, like, Yeah, I wanna cooperate, because, like, that's just you might think you want to cooperate, but we really see it in practice, like, you know, there are some farmers who, when something goes wrong they'll send it where we use slack, so it'll be, you know, they'll send out a Slack message being like XY and went wrong. Here's what I tried,

Here's what I'm thinking needs to happen next, you know, is anybody around tomorrow to sort of help out? That's the farmer I want. You know, we have some of those, and we have some people who are like, Hey, this thing broke. And I'm like, Okay, well. this is your farm.

You know we have... I think there's a lot of... There's some people who think of it as like shared. And there's some people who think of it as like I'm the landlord, and they're the lessee, and I should do everything for them. And it does not seem to really play into the dynamic what the lease says, frankly. Because that...we've tried to be like, here are the places where it explains... Like, you know, we are not.... We don't have the staff to just sort of like be at your beck and call to like help you troubleshoot XY and Z. Some of it, you know... Some of it you're gonna have to try and figure it out yourself, or call the other farmers which does always work well, you know. And there's always a moment in the season where it's like, oh, it's getting hot. Let's put the shade cloth up, and then there's a little bit of a text exchange, and then it's like great, tomorrow 10am. 6 of us will be there. We're gonna put the shade cloth up. And that's really what we're looking for is just people who are...who are choosing the cooperative model because they see value in there being other people around them and wanting to be a part of a community that really like shows up for each other.

And I think for a certain kind of person that sounds like a big lift, and for other people that sounds very natural, which is not a dig at anyone that it sounds like a big lift for. But I think if it sounds really natural, then you're probably gonna be a good, a good match here, because it's in your nature, you know, to sort of want to lend a hand.

Question (Colleen):

I have a question because you mentioned slack, and I'm wondering like, do you use slack for pest management, for Project support? Is that your main way farmers are communicating with one another and you?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, it's the main way we're communicating with each other. We do a fair amount of emailing as well. But there seems to be a time and a place for an email, and then we try

and do everything else through slack. We really like it... We were really resistant at first. I was like, isn't that for like corporations? I don't know. I just like didn't really see how that was gonna apply to us. And then it has been so incredibly helpful. Because we can have conversations... I mean, as you know, you can have conversations about things that don't necessarily have to involve every person, but then every person can access that. So, for example, there's a greenhouse thread. And we use it heavily in the spring to say, you know, Hey? It was getting hot. I rolled up the sides or like, I'm I'm gonna be gone. Can someone else, you know, close it down? I'm usually the one to close it up at night. But I'm leaving early today, FYI. So someone else, please close it down.

And if you had to send that in a text message to everyone who might be around, that would be very laborious. But to be able to just use Slack in that way is great. We don't actually use it for pest management, but that's a great point, and we should just start a pest thread because it would be great for people to be able to be like. I saw my first potato beetle, or whatever.

And... but mostly we use it, for like greenhouse coordination, wash, station coordination. There's an equipment channel. And then just sort of a general like, I brought brownies in there in the barn type of thing.

Question (Tamar):

So how do you communicate around pest management? And do you have systems for that?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, I guess we don't really. Maybe informally people talk about it. You know, people tend to... The farmers mostly are running into each other sort of like at lunchtime. There's sort of a couple of different shade zones where people cluster, and then at the wash station, because when they're crossing paths. But we don't have like a official way that we're communicating about pests at all. Yeah.

Question (Tamar):

And do you also have any sort of collaboration or cooperation around like shared production?

Answer (Sarah):

So we've talked about it a lot. And actually that I'm gonna just say out loud that we should also talk about, we do share like materials, like we'll buy compost together. We'll buy potting soil together and stuff like that. But we, maybe 3 years ago, we really, I really was like, listen, y'all are all growing the same thing. And maybe you don't all want to grow everything, you know, especially because you're all running CSAs. Like, It's exhausting to try and grow a bazillion different crops, and have, you know, a lot of diversity like maybe we should consider shifting things here. And maybe John really likes growing tomatoes, and maybe Sasha really likes growing potatoes, and we should

actually like work something out here. And I think there was like intrigue, but we talked about it a lot. We talked about it over time, and I talked about it also, just, you know, with the board and with my staff, and just sort of like trying to think about the psychology of this shift.

And ultimately, I think it's too scary. People were like, it's too... if they were coming in and it was like, this is a shared production model and here's what I'm buying into, that would be one thing. But I think these people, with their established clientele, they've been with these people for years. They have sort of their groove, putting that you know power and expectation in the hands of another grower, even a grower that you know and like is just like scary, so we haven't done it.

But I think personally, that's a great idea. And if I was going to be a farmer again, that's definitely what I would do. And I mean, even more importantly, I think that for this property, specifically, you know, we've been here now, growing for long enough that we know like, oh, actually, that field's like a little bit shadier than is preferable, that field's a little bit wetter. You know there are places where it would be better or worse to grow certain things.

and nobody really set up their field for tractor except 1. One person set up their field to actually be able to like, cultivate, and build beds and stuff for the tractor. Everybody else's is set up too tight.

So it would be really smart if we together cultivated an acre somewhere of like, you know, just winter squash on black plastic, or other things that would make sense to do sort of at a bigger scale. But we have not taken the plunge.

Tamar:

That's interesting, like the culture around it. And the psychology of it is really interesting.

Sarah:

Yeah, the way that someone... I can't remember now who it was who said this to me. But I was talking with someone about it, about like, you know... Why? Why don't they want to do it? Basically not as a judgment thing, just like, why don't you think they want to do it, and they were like farmers are choosing to be farmers for a reason, and one of them is like they are violently independent, you know, like part of being a farmer, and I agree, is like you get to make all your own decisions. You reap what you sow, literally. You know you are... You are putting in the inputs, and you are taking out the outputs. And there's like you and nature. And that is what it is. And so taking that decision, taking power out of someone's hands and putting it into someone else's hands, and really having to count on them is really scary.

And I think it's also intimidating for people to think about. How you know? How would the money work, like if I'm growing a more labor-intensive crop? You know, there is nuance there to which I would always just say, You know, somebody has definitely

already done this, so we could learn from them. But yeah, I think it's just I think it's a big mental hurdle. But I'm not gonna give up. I'm gonna bring it up every other year and still see what happens.

Question (Tamar):

Shifting gears a little bit. We're also curious to hear about like, in addition to the farmers individual business also, like how are you financing as a nonprofit and supporting these farmers, and supporting continually, like leasing this land like what is the, If you're comfortable sharing about the financial situation? and then any financial challenges you've had and how you're being funded?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, totally. So a lot of private funding. When we started the property, the project, the brothers who are the landowners basically agreed to seed fund it for a couple of years, and so they put in,

I don't remember, but, like probably close to \$300,000, putting in wells infrastructure building the wash station, getting a cold storage building, you know, all of the different sort of like things that to me felt like non-negotiable like. I don't feel good about bringing farmers onto this property without storage. I don't feel good about bringing farmers onto this property without somewhere to wash their vegetables. You know, these things that felt like... the heated greenhouse felt like, Okay, we can... That would be nice. But I'm not gonna say that's a non-negotiable. Tractor, like that's not a non-negotiable because other things were. And then and also paying me and paying some other staff.

So they put up a lot of money in the beginning.

And simultaneously we do have some earned income. So like we have a pick your own blueberry operation that's been here since the eighties. That's very well known. We get a lot of traffic. So we do that in the summer we do run a CSA we've tried other sort of like,

you know, pick your own flowers, like you know little things like that to try and bring in more earned income. We do, this is where the sort of the other pieces of the puzzle of the organization come into play. So we do a lot of education. We do a lot of community events, and those all usually bring in some money, not a ton of money, but some. We do rent the property for weddings specifically because it brings in revenue. So that brings in probably maybe \$15,000 a year or something. It's not a ton of money, but it's something.

And we try like specifically when we apply for funding, when we apply for grants and things to fund our youth program, we're always trying to figure out ways that can also be serving, you know, the general just sort of operating costs of the property. By far our biggest expenses are just sort of like our overhead are like baseline, like filling the Diesel tank, like, you know, all the electricity, maintenance of buildings, like equipment repair.

Staff. Yeah, that's what costs us a lot of money. So So some earned income, some amount of seed funding, a decent amount of like just individual donors, outside of that family. So... it's about, I would say our breakdown is about a 1/3 grants, individual donors, and earned income at least last year it was.

And we've been really lucky a lot of the sort of more expensive stuff that we've taken on like buying a tractor, buying a BCS, building a heated greenhouse. Those have all been MDAR grants. And we've gotten, I think we like just look really good on paper because we're serving a bunch of different farmers all at once. So, when we buy a tractor it's helping 20 farmers instead of one farmer. So we've gotten really lucky we got.... We got FSIG grants twice. We've gotten Climate Smart Ag grants. Got one other one that's escaping me right now. So we apply to all the MDAR grants, always, and then other like private family foundations and philanthropic foundations we apply to like crazy.

We specifically apply to those to support the cooperative farmer program quite a bit. We actually haven't had a ton of luck. But I will continue to keep doing that because that's... We... I've have found_ I'm really not a development person. I mean, I am functionally, but I'm that's not my background. And I'm learning as I go. But I find that with the foundations it's really just like, if I can tell a good story, I'm pretty much gonna get there. And the cooperative farming story is such a compelling story. You know, more than like land conservation or like whatever. So trying to really nail down telling that story. And why land access is so important. And you know how we're losing all the farmers in the country, and blah blah blah, as you know.

So we do have really good luck with foundation funding for our education program. So we try and have as much crossover there as possible and fund like, you know, greenhouse upkeep via it serves the education program. But actually, it's also serving the farmers. That kind of thing.

So yeah, I mean, we are really, I will say, like, our budget has been under \$300,000 always a year. People have asked me what I would do if I had twice that much money, and the answer is all the same things with more help. You know we are like we are a little bit cursed by the fact that I... this this is like embarrassing to say on a recorded video. So I should not say this. But basically, I just like worked myself into the ground in the first couple of years because I really wanted this to work. But I that means that I set expectations for what one person can do way off kilter and now I have 2 little kids that I didn't have when I started this that are 9 months and 3 years old, and I don't have, you know, 24 hours of the day to commit to this project anymore. And so we're really feeling that lately of like, what can actually happen in a day, realistically.

And we have great staff. But we just don't have enough money to have the amount of staff that we would really like to have. You know, I think we can—And by we, I mean, like me and the board basically— can see really clearly what we would do if we had the capacity to do it. And a lot of it has to do with just sort of general things that feel like

they should have already happened, because they're little. It's like, Oh, like, wouldn't it be nice if somebody would go down and like pull all the invasives out of that one like really public area, that people are always seeing how much bittersweet is growing through our stone wall. And it's just like, well, that's simply not the priority, and cannot be the priority. But there's an infinite list of things like that. If we just had twice as much staff. That kind of thing would be getting done. And we wouldn't feel like we're always behind on stuff like that, which is just like kind of a bummer way to go through your day, you know.

So yeah, I will say that, like, we're not really, we're not really big enough or established enough to be applying for big Federal funding. So when the whole Federal funding shenanigan started to happen, we were not really directly impacted. But we are seeing the impacts now in terms of like, *everyone* is applying for anything that they can find. And so we're getting a lot more rejections than we had in the past, I think, last year. By this time we had already been funded by like 15 private foundations, and this time this year we've heard back from like 2. So we're definitely seeing the impacts. And we're kind of about to find out how bad that is gonna be for us in the coming months.

So we're pivoting, I think, as everyone is to like really reaching into our network and figuring out who are the supporters on our supporter list who have the capacity to step up and help us. and we'll see what happens. You know it's like not a good time for anybody. It's definitely not a good time for us. It's really stressful. There's so many organizations that are laying people off and having to make really hard decisions. And so far, we haven't had to do that. And I really hope it continues because we don't really have any humans to spare. Not that anyone does.

But yeah, I mean had...was this, if we were not in July of 2025, when we're having this conversation in like July of 2024, and talking about funding, I would say that like

we get very lucky with grants, because a lot of...because Massachusetts Department of Ag is just so great with their grant programs. Specifically, Massachusetts and a lot of what is costly about running a farm that is cooperative is the same thing that's costly about running a farm from one person which is infrastructure and equipment. And so the fact that we can offset a lot of that with those grants has been huge. And then, yeah, just looking to individuals and foundations for more support for specific things.

Question (Colleen):

Do you have the like records of...Because you all have been around, you know, for longer of initial costs, and like your budgets over time? Cause we have a farm that is interested in what sort of the trajectory over time looks like, and what some of those unexpected costs are. So if you'd be willing to share, and we could just look at them to get like a sense, it'd be really helpful.

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, I'm sure that I have them in like not a form you'd want to look at them. But I will digest some of the information for you. And yeah, definitely. I'll send that over. I'm happy to share. Absolutely.

it's never what you think you're gonna spend money on. You know. It's like somebody... we were talking about a new building recently, and the contractor I was talking to was like, Well, believe it or not, the most expensive part of any building is the concrete slab, and I was like blegh, so boring. And she was like, I know.

I feel like that was like a perfect, you know, parallel, I was just like, Oh, yeah, man. These goddamn concrete slabs that eat up all your money, not the fun stuff.

Question (Tamar):

Yeah. And speaking of the fun stuff, is it possible for the organization or the farmers themselves to be building equity in the farm?

Answer (Sarah):

yeah, that's a good question. So no, not really, because we don't own anything. The nonprofit doesn't really own anything. That's not true. We own a greenhouse, and we own a tractor but because the entity is just on this 10-year lease that will then renew for another 10 years with the land.

Yeah, we have not really been able to wrap our heads around a way that the farmers can be building equity. We have pitched several times_ This isn't sound like I'm pitching them bad ideas all the time—but we have pitched several times like what the Intervale does with the shared equipment like ownership model, specifically because we got these pieces of equipment through grants. We were like, this is a perfect opportunity. Nobody has to front the money. You know. Let's just figure out some sort of buy-in situation where you guys actually own this tractor together? So that there starts to be something tangible. But what we met resistance on was basically that, like most people are signing one- or 2-year leases and just renewing them over and over again. Most people have not really been ready to commit to a longer term lease, and I think people are intimidated by the idea of like a buying into, even at a subsidized rate, something like owning a tractor. If they don't really know that they're gonna be here. So that hasn't gotten very far. We've really pushed for it, because there's a general air of discomfort around like we are lessees, and that's all we are. And we've tried to be like, well, let's figure out how you can actually have more literal ownership and also just more like emotional buy in so you don't feel like at the end of the day we're just lessees, and we don't get a say because that's not how I feel about them.

But then we sort of come up against this constant tension of like, well, nobody wants to like give in too far. It's like, you know, we're trying to be like, okay, well, what can we... What can we offer you that's gonna make you feel more comfortable? And then what they could ultimately be offered is like an assurance that that nothing's gonna ever

change. And like we actually don't have that, because we, too, are just leasing this land, and are sort of at the whim of the landowners continuing to want us to be here. I mean, there are clauses in the lease that say like, if the master lease gets terminated for some reason, if the nonprofit is no longer allowed to lease from the landowners the farmers then just transition to being directly leasing from them. I mean, we try to put in some protection so that nobody's gonna get like kicked off their farm spontaneously in the middle of a season, or something like that. That can't happen, at least on paper. But I think that you know the fact that the nonprofit does not actually own, you know, ideal would be the farmers on the land in a shared model of some kind.

That's not the situation. Next ideal would be that the land is owned by the nonprofit. That's also not the situation. So then we're like two levels up of like, it's actually just privately owned by this like wealthy family, and then sort of like by their good graces we are all then allowed to be here, and that's just uncomfortable at the end of the day, because it's just people, you know.

Question (Colleen):

Would the two landowners be open to like, you know, a Commons type arrangement? Is that are those conversations happening? Or is this...?

Answer (Sarah):

That's a good question. I think we're not...

I think things feel too precarious right now in terms of like the funding of the organization, and sort of all the things that have been shifting around. We have not yet had, and maybe we'll never have, maybe this is an illusion, but I feel like we've been kind of waiting to have like one just like really solid, like calm year, where, like nothing implodes and like there's no big drama, and we don't have to spend a ton of money on some unexpected thing, like we just wanna have like one year where we're like, everything's just kind of like going the way we wanted it to, to then sort of move into those conversations, and we, just like have not had it yet.

I think that theoretically I could see them being open to it. But we're not there yet.

Question (Tamar):

Interesting. So what... Have you had any situations of like conflict between the farmers beyond, like funding challenges and the nonprofit that you've had to navigate? And what sort of tools or tactics have you used to navigate conflict or disagreement?

Answer (Sarah):

I would say, the biggest conflicts we had. Were like personality based. We had a group renting from us, prior to that lease being taken over by the person who now runs Sin Fronteras, who were like an advocacy group. They were doing a lot of like social justice, advocacy in Providence with like incarceration, and whatever all sorts of things. And they butted heads with one of the owners. And this was early days, and so we didn't

really... we just like didn't really see it coming. And we didn't even realize it was happening until it was like really happening. And then it was like, who has the power here? like what's going on, you know? like what's going on?

We never actually, I think we talked about bringing in a mediator, and then never actually ended up needing it, or chose not to do it. We did have a lot of just sort of like group grievance airing conversations. We have used mediators in one on one situations since then that, like I don't wanna say didn't need them. It's I always love having a mediator, but that we're like less dramatic and that we've just sort of chosen to use a mediator to streamline things. We have an official like, on paper, we have a process that basically says, like, if you have a grievance, use the XY and Z process to submit it to the director. If the director is involved, submit it to this person instead, and then, like, we will use a mediator and like resolve things. And no one has ever used that system to my knowledge. It has always been more something gets brought up in a meeting, and then we all talk about it. Or it happens like one on one, you know. It'll be a more informal thing like.

Hey, did that person actually go through the tractor training because I saw them do something really stupid. Kind of thing. So yeah, I mean, we've been lucky that we have had very little like what I would call big conflict. We've had plenty of minor conflict that we've sort of worked through just in conversation. You know, like anybody else would.

Question (Colleen):

I'm sorry. Do you mind just expanding a little further on, like what the personality conflict looks like, and what you think maybe could have prevented it? Or is it not preventable?

Answer (Sarah):

I don't think that was preventable. I think that was like a generational and cultural divide being crossed of like people just not really understanding each other or wanting to understand each other, and like flaring up. It was like, you know, people feeling judged, like maybe being judged. There was an instance of like the landowners had, like family visiting, who were like mobility challenged. And so they were using, like one of the Gator vehicles that we share to like, bring their family member around, and like brought them past the field. And then the farmers were like we felt like we were being like paraded, like we were in a zoo, because they like rode past us and just like waved. And I was like, Okay, I don't... I don't know. It's like their uncle is in town. They're like showing him the farm. I don't know what to tell you. A lot of stuff like that, like when people's backs are already up. Then, like everything is a thing, you know.

And I think frankly, at the end of the day, like coming up against the fact that like shared land is shared land, and like, you're not ever, actually alone. And so that goes for everyone. You know I live on the farm. I'm never alone. The people that I work with and live next to are always right here, and that's the same for the farmers, and that's the same for the people who live here, you know, you're sort of always being observed for better or worse.

Definitely a challenge of a shared land arrangement. Yeah.

Question (Tamar): So has the organization beyond, once again, like beyond funding, received support from like technical assistance providers or like the Department of Agriculture?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, we worked with. Well, we work with NRCS. They helped us sort of overhaul our whole irrigation situation and did some cost sharing on some of the stuff that we were able to do, and a lot of technical assistance for sure. And we just started a new NRCS contract that's more like forestry based and like invasive management. That will start next year. So that'll be cool.

And then we've worked with American Farmland Trust a fair amount. I went through their like soil learning cohort for a year, as did one of our farmers, actually, and they did a ton of soil, like really digging into soils with us and thinking about... I mean, they've been an incredible resource outside of just the actual like formal programs. I talked to Caro anytime I have a question about soil or management, or anything, and she's been amazing.

And who else have we worked with?

Those are the only 2 that are like jumping to mind in terms of formal. I mean we would and do theoretically like use extension. We like still use Rhode Island extension because most of our farmers live in Rhode Island, and we all just forget that we're in Massachusetts. So we'll call Rhode Island extension with, you know, bug questions, or pest or plant id questions and stuff like that. And they've been great.

Question (Tamar):

Does the organization support the farmers with any specific resources? Or it's mostly just the organization finding.. does that? Does that question make sense? Are you giving them workshops? Besides the training or...?

Answer (Sarah):

Not really. We've done a couple like we've done like, I said, like tractor training. We brought in Cynthia, who does labor movement a couple of years ago to do like a movement workshop. But we haven't really taken the role of like offering workshops or education. We've thought about it a lot. And like, what would we do if that was something we were gonna offer?

But we haven't actually done it.

Question (Tamar):

And so what impacts... Just like a bit of reflection. But what impacts have you noticed, or have you felt that this model has had, for, like the farmers themselves, and also for the broader community?

Answer (Sarah):

Well, I think the broader community thinks it's really cool. People are always like, Wow. you know, because people will come to the farm to pick blueberries or whatever, and they'll be like, what do you guys grow here? And I'll be like, well, we grow blueberries. But there's actually 9 other farms on this property that are all growing all sorts of things. I think it's especially, for you know, just the sort of everyday visitor of the place, or someone who drives by really eye-opening to people. I feel like, what if you're not a farmer and you're not in the food world, It's really hard to have a sense of how much food can come off, of how much space and just the sheer volume of food that you can produce on a pretty small amount of land. So the idea that, like what people are seeing as one farm can actually be sustaining, that many businesses, I think, is pretty transformative for people's understanding of our food system, which is really cool, and we really try and drill it into any young people that are here, for we do like a teen apprenticeship program. And then we have lots of different sort of little workshops for kids and stuff. And we're always trying to make sure they're understanding that, like, you know. just this part right here like that's somebody's farm, and that's their whole job. And they come here every day, and they do, you know, that's enough. That's like a lot just to sort of try to come to terms with that sense of scale. And for the farmers, I mean, for all of the headaches and things you know they have said... they have written me very beautiful letters for Grant proposals, and they will say anecdotally that like if not for the shared model, and I think that they they would probably refer to it as a shared infrastructure model. I know that it is shared land use model. But like I think for them, it's the infrastructure that's a really big piece of it is that like if they had if they were trying to start a farm, and they had to build their own greenhouse and figure out how to get it heated and build a wash-pack and build themselves a cold storage, and figure out all those different pieces. They just wouldn't be able to do it like it's just too much upfront expectation, especially considering that most people are leasing land, and all of those things that you're investing in are big, not movable things unless you're willing to like disassemble something that you've built. So I think just the access to a quality I mean, quality is a funny word to use, because our wash-pack is like very ramshackle and sad, and not super high quality, but in theory, I think the access to such a better quality and scale of infrastructure than a farmer would be able to sort of scrap together on their own is like transformative for someone being able to then really just focus on what they're trying to do, which is growing. You know, and they've framed it as like, you know, I have the luxury of being able to think about like what cover crop mix do I want to use, you know, like, how? How can I assess my soil health? What are the sort of, what are the more sort of nuanced decisions that I am freed up to make because I don't have to think about like, do I have somewhere to put my produce when I've picked it?

And, that's what we wanted. So I like, I feel great about that. Again, sort of like headaches aside, you know, I think there's I'm coming to realize that like there's just always gonna be headaches and that's fine.

You know, we're not going to get it perfect. Things are not going to be perfect. We don't have infinite money, we can't just fix things the second that they break sometimes, and that would be true whether it was me farming here alone or there was a group of people. And that's just the way it is.

But I think that people are finding a lot of value in the shared infrastructure. And in the community, you know, I think not everybody... I think we had a sort of idyllic idea that, like everyone's gonna like, Wanna have hamburgers together on Fridays, and like a really like cool thing going on. And that's not necessarily the case. But it is the case that when someone needs, you know, half a bag of bone meal because they ran out, and they don't want to have to place another order. They have someone, they have nine someones that they can ask without leaving the property, and that is so valuable.

And you know, seedling season when it's like hot. I watered somebody's plants last night at like 9:30, because they texted, and they were like, I'm stuck with my family, like I didn't get there. It was really hot today, can somebody water? And I was like, Yeah, of course. I'm happy to walk down there and water for you. And if you're just farming alone, you don't have someone to do that. So those really little pieces of community standing up for each other, I think, are going a long way.

Question (Tamar):

That's great. And I realized I forgot to ask in terms of like, after you, you know, invite a farmer, decide. You know this farmer is, gonna be farming here. How do you distribute the land like is, how are the parcels distributed to the amount to the farmers?

Answer (Sarah):

Because we don't really have more—so I should have said, like, we don't really have more land we can open up without some other work happening. We are pretty much like cropping all of the cropable areas. So at this point, it's really just a more of like a distribution among users of what is available. And we're not taking land away from anyone. So, we have just been sort of matchmaking. So it's just kind of like, you know, if we theoretically have... if one of my farmers left tomorrow and an acre parcel opened up, I would basically look at all of the farmers that have asked about land, and see who is in that range, and then have some further conversations to make a sort of decision about who's the best fit for what's available. I would... I'm always advocating for... I don't feel like I'm advocating for people to have bigger parcels. I don't want people to grow on more space than they want, but if someone has already... if a parcel has already been set up as a 1 acre parcel. I am disinclined to break it into 2 or 3 or 4, because that's more users like, I don't want just more users for the sake of getting more people on land. That doesn't track for me. I would rather have fewer users using the space more efficiently, if possible.

That would mean, you know, 2 or 3 or 4 users wanting to find a time to be in the wash station versus one.

Question (Tamar):

And then also does the shared farm or organization have, like a business plan, or strategic plan and then how has that changed over time, and was that you who created it?

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, that we don't have a specific business plan or strategic plan just for the farmer project. We probably should, actually, that would be kind of a cool exercise to do. The program is part of our master strategic plan, which is written by the board. Over the course of a couple of years. And it mostly refers to like improving infrastructure. You know, it's not super like lofty. It's kind of like the bar is low for what we're trying to accomplish, at least in the next couple of years.

So yeah, we don't really have. There's not like a guiding kind of like our goal is to get to, you know, 15 acres of leased land, or, you know, 20 users, or anything like there's nothing like that. It's just kind of like a constant sort of like matchmaking between, like, what do we have? What do people need? And how can we sort of like match these two?

Question (Tamar):

And is that like matchmaking goal visioning done in collaboration? Like who's who's responsible for that process?

Answer (Sarah):

So, yeah, so the the process by which we're bringing in new farmers the voices that are involved in that is the existing farmers. So the there's a subcommittee of the board that manages like land stewardship activities, basically. And they review all the app review, all the intake form, all the proposals. Then if they don't immediately disqualify someone, if they're not like this person, is never gonna work here, then it goes to the farmers and the farmers all get a chance to basically read and comment and ask questions. And we have had people ask questions.

And then it goes to back to the committee, the subcommittee, and then it goes to the full board. So everything goes in front of...

So ultimately, everyone in the organization gets like eyes, gets an opportunity basically to have their say, somebody would have to have a really strong opinion like no one person has veto power, and somebody would have to have like a really really strong opinion, to sort of go to, to outweigh all of the other voices that have said something is fine. Basically, does that make sense.

And we haven't had that happen, and it would probably honestly have to be based on like personal knowledge that they are a monster of some kind, you know. I don't think it's gonna be based on like I don't think that they should get to grow watermelons here, or something.

Question (Caitlin): I appreciate how thorough you've been, and open and honest and I feel like I've learned so much, and I just continue to learn so much from each interview that we do so that's wonderful. I think you've covered some of this. But if you want to just have, like a brief what would I have done different? The thing that stands out at the top. Or I wish I...I've learned about this thing since I started, and I wish I'd implemented that first.

Answer (Sarah):

Yeah, totally. 2 things. One. I wish we had taken more time and gotten our infrastructure just set up more thoroughly before bringing farmers on. I really felt like I couldn't separate me, the farmer from me that now in the role that I have. And I was just like, if we have land, like it had taken me so long to find the land that I was farming on, that I was just like, Oh, my God! If we have the ability to get five farmers onto land next year, like we just have to do it like, I just could not fathom sitting on it for another year. And I really wish we had because that just meant five farmers that had to like go through more growing pains with us than needed to.

And then the other thing is really, really hammering out the boundaries with the landowners. If the landowners are, whether or not they live here, but definitely, if they live here.

Because we're doing that now, like we're basically now, we're having to go back and be like, listen, like we all like each other like everything's fine. This is not a crisis moment, but like before it is a crisis moment. Let's be really clear, like when there's an emergency, what should happen when you know, there's animals on the... We have horses on the property that belong to the landowners. So that's a perfect example. Like this winter, one of the horses like was out on the ice in the pond, and somebody noticed, and they were like, Well, what am I supposed to do? Those aren't my horses. Whose horses are they? Like, what's their phone number? You know, stuff like that that we're now hammering out like, okay, here's an emergency protocol. What if ICE shows up on the farm, like, what's our protocol there?

And down to like, who knows what and on what frequency, all these things that we were just sort of like, it's fine, it's fine, it's fine, and like it is fine. But we'd like it to continue being fine. And so, actually, all of those things should be defined. **It's like generous to be explicit with your boundaries, as we all know. So we're trying to sort of go back, which is harder than doing it in the beginning, and figure out what feels good and what makes sense and how to share space.** And I think that would be true, even if that wasn't the landowners. I think it would be true if it was just, if there was more expectation of the farmers taking care of shared space, I think we would have known from the start that those expectations needed to be very explicit, and because it was not the farmers,

because it was the nonprofit and the landowners we were like, we'll figure it out, and like we shouldn't have done that.