

Brunswick farm lease could set precedent for New England



Photo by Kathleen McLaughlin

Shepherds Tom Settemire, past president of the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust, and farmer Seth Kroeck count and mark sheep at Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick.

by Kathleen McLaughlin
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BRUNSWICK — In what is seen as a possible model for land trusts and farmers throughout New England, the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust and farmers Seth Kroeck and Maura Bannon have entered into a 50-year lease agreement for Crystal Spring Farm.

Neither side would discuss the specific dollar amounts, but Kroeck said the 40-plus page document that took three years to negotiate is a “fair arrangement” that addresses his family’s main concerns: Long-term security, maintenance of farm buildings, and the potential to build equity in their farm business and even in the organic soil that they till.

Kroeck and Bannon have lived on and worked the 115-acre farm at 277 Pleasant Hill Road since 2004, building a successful on-farm CSA and sheep business known throughout the Portland area and the Midcoast.

They have had two consecutive five-year leases with the land trust while negotiating the longer deal. They’ve also started a family, and have two children, Griffin and Leila, who attend Brunswick schools.

“We couldn’t be happier to be entering this agreement with Seth and Maura,” said Tom Settemire, a BTLT board member, past president and one of the original

founders of the land trust. “It has been years in the making, and just shows how fantastic the relationship is between this incredible farm family and the land trust.”

Angela Twitchell, executive director of the BTLT, said the organization got what it wanted: A guarantee that the historic farm would continue to be used for agricultural purposes for many years to come, and that the entire 321-acre farm property on Pleasant Hill Road would continue to be used for agriculture, conservation and recreation.

“It’s a win-win-win for all of us — the farmers, the land trust and the community,” Twitchell said.

Among the current public uses for the land located just a few miles from downtown Brunswick are walking trails that intersect Crystal Spring Farm and a very popular outdoor farmers market that runs through the summer and early fall. In 2013, Crystal Spring Farmers Market was named the best market in New England by Yankee Magazine.

Twitchell said while the lease does make demands on the farmers that go beyond the realm of the normal tenant-landlord relationship, it is also transferable. In other words, Kroeck and Bannon will be able to sell or transfer their stake in Crystal Spring Farm and plan for their retirement. Some of the money collected from rent will be set aside in a fund to be

used for maintenance of the farm house, barns and outbuildings.

In researching long-term leases between land trusts and farmers around New England and across the country, the BTLT came up empty-handed, Twitchell said.

“There just aren’t a lot of examples out there,” she said, adding that this gives the lease potential historical significance.

Kroeck said he’s already had inquiries about the lease from other farms and land trusts, but stops short of calling it a model that could be used just anywhere.

“I think the caveat is, this is not a cookie-cutter relationship where you can just take it off the shelf and make it work for anybody,” he said.

Kroeck recommends that any farmer considering a lease arrangement enter into a short-term lease first and make sure there is a good working relationship with the landowner before signing a long-term agreement.

Now that the busy CSA and farmers’ market season is over, Kroeck is looking forward to a quieter winter and lambing season as well as planning for another successful harvest next year.

The land trust, meanwhile, is entering the final phase of a major capital campaign to raise \$7 million toward land conservation and stewardship. Since forming in 1985, the trust has secured some 2,300 acres for public use.

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