

Important Considerations in Evaluating Potential Incubator Farms

Land:

This is an essential part of the equation we are trying to provide through incubator farms. Keep in mind that this should be quality farm land. New farmers entering into this market have plenty of challenges. This land should be not only available but very suitable for farming endeavors. In some cases, we have identified land that can be appropriate given a season or more of cover cropping. The essential focus here is to not consider unproductive land as a possibility for incubating successful enterprises.

Equipment, Infrastructure:

Equipment needs vary with the type of agricultural enterprise that is developed. Not all farms must have the same equipment available but should have the necessary and appropriate equipment to complement the type of farming design being promoted. The equipment should be in good working order. Other examples of infrastructure can include irrigation systems, perhaps greenhouses if needed for farming enterprise, appropriate shelters, processing/shipping and handling areas, and other utilities needed for the farming enterprise.

Experience/Mentorship

Keeping in mind that we are reaching out to new farmers, it is imperative that experience and guidance is available to the perspective new grower. The needs for this will be new grower specific. The manner in which this educational support is designed will be specific to the resources each incubator has available. Some incubators are already offering or planning formalized educational courses/workshops/classes/field trips into the incubator offering. The experience on how to use this equipment properly and safely is an important part of the incubator concept. (i.e., tractors, greenhouses, post harvest handling equipment, etc.). Also, if these are starting farmers, we must consider the vital components of a well designed farm production system. New farmers will need educational/mentoring opportunities in the areas of soil management, irrigation scheduling, pest management, fertility and rotation designs, harvesting techniques, planting and harvest schedules, etc. etc. It is imperative that experience is available to assist the new farmer in the creation of a profitable and biologically sound business/production plan. If not all the experience needed is available from the local incubator mentor/manager, then these resources must be found in the community and brought to these new farmers.

Market and Business Components

It is important to keep in mind that we are incubating profitable businesses. This requires that a business plan and cost considerations are carefully made for each enterprise. This will require that an incubator manager/mentor be familiar with the market place. If not, then local people can be recruited to bring this vital understanding and insight to the incubator farm. New farmers may be able to simply fit into an existing market. It is still important to help the new farmers understand how to evaluate a market place and the tools necessary to do so. We lose a lot of new farmers to bad business ideas. This is a very critical part of creating new growers.

Housing

One of the capstones of the incubator program is that we are creating shared resources for people who may be resource limited. If an incubator program exists near a very strong market, then the higher costs of living may be assumed. Although there are very few situations where housing can be provided by incubator programs, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind. We should foresee that the people we are hopefully addressing, perhaps even limited resource farmers will not be able to sustain themselves if the costs of living supersede the flow from the revenue of early incubation years. This is not to say that incubators can only exist if they provide housing. This is just to say that we must understand and support the real situations that the new farmer faces as they move towards independence. There are several things that can be done. Search out your area for affordable housing. Consider some form of temporary housing for your incubatees. Consider shared housing situations, local campgrounds, cooperative housing. Again, providing housing is not a prerequisite to incubation farms but an important consideration

Insurance

The ideals of incubating new farmers and having more people on the farm are indeed an inspiring. We should also keep in mind issues of liability and injury potentials on the farm. We neither want to have a situation where incubation farms are liable and at risk or a situation where new farmers are injured and have no means of seeking care. All should seek advice from people familiar with these issues and ways to construct creative solutions. We should remember that agriculture is still in the top of the list of occupations with injuries. Plan this carefully.

Available Land for Graduated Incubatees.

One goal of the incubator farm movement is to get independent producers out on the land and set up for market. Although it seems far down the road, it's never too early to be thinking of land availability outside of your incubator farm. All indications appear to be saying that land is going to continue to be a major challenge for aspiring producers. So, it's never too early to work with your neighbors, towns, counties to identify areas that may eventually house new growers. This project and the Responses of the community at large, are testimonies to the willingness of landowners, given good design (economic, environmental, cultural), to make their land available (sale, lease, rent, etc) for new growers/producers. So, talk to your neighbors and local representatives.