



Introducing Sunil Puri, NFU-O Land-Linking and Young Farmer Support Specialist!

A warm and hearty hello to *The Rural Voice* readership! My name is Sunil Levinson Puri, and I am the newest staff member of the NFU-Ontario. I have been a long-time reader of *The Rural Voice*, however this is my first time as a contributor. Please allow me to introduce myself and my role with the NFU-O, I will include my contact information at the end for anyone who would like to further the conversation!

As demographics in agriculture continue to shift and farm families age towards retirement, farmland succession has been a major concern facing rural communities in Ontario. Over the past year the NFU-O has facilitated a series of workshops that identified many farm families would prefer to age in place and see their land continue to be farmed rather than sold for development. Our “Land-Linking & Farmland Conservation” workshops further identified a massive barrier to access farmland for new and young farmers who are predominantly coming from urban areas or non-farm-holding families.

Within these trends is a tremendous opportunity for land partnership between retiring land holders and aspiring land-seekers. These partnerships would provide a critical foothold for new farmers to become established and would allow retiring farmers to age in place, continue to be a part of their communities and pass on their rich farming knowledge while seeing their land remain in agricultural production. I joined the NFU-O team this fall to seize this opportunity.

My role as the Land-Linking and Young Farmer Support Specialist will be to facilitate the connection between land-holders and land-seekers, support the creation of land partnerships and to gather resources that will empower new land-holders

to responsibly steward the land and operate viable farm businesses. I am grateful and excited for the opportunity to work with established, retiring and new farmers to create land partnerships that will help bring young people back to rural areas. I believe that facilitating the transition of farmland to new and young farmers will not only help to protect farmland from development but may reignite once thriving rural communities with young blood and new ideas.

As a new farmer operating off of rented land I believe I bring a critical perspective to this role as someone who has navigated and learned from successful and unsuccessful land partnerships.

I began working in agriculture in 2016 with an internship at Manorun Organic Farm, a mixed CSA, livestock and grain farm in Copetown, serving the Hamilton area. Since then I have worked on a number of farms in Ontario, and abroad, in operations from vegetable production to dairy. Today I have a small market garden operation called Feel Free Farm on rented land in Jerseyville and I work part-time as a lead hand and operator at Manorun Farm.

The land I rent today is owned by my former employer, Shawn, an NFU farming member whom I worked for during the 2018 and 2019 seasons. After making the tough decision to step away from farming and pursue more financially stable employment in the city, Shawn offered me the opportunity to continue to use his land and infrastructure.

The land partnership has been beneficial for both of us in different ways. Shawn is intrinsically



motivated to see his property remain in production, and to see the land and infrastructure maintained rather than fall into disrepair. In keeping Shawn’s land productive I have had the opportunity to access land and infrastructure without needing to go into debt. This has allowed me to slowly build a resilient and viable farm business, an opportunity I would not otherwise have given the current real estate climate. Further, I have greatly benefited from Shawn’s existing knowledge about the land and his unofficial mentorship.

I am looking forward to making many more connections like this across Ontario and to find other young farmers the type of opportunity I have had. I truly believe that the creation of land succession plans and land partnerships that bring young people back to farming will aid in the creation of vibrant and thriving rural communities and resilient local economies and food systems across the urban rural divide.

If you are interested in talking with me more as either a land-holder or land-seeker please contact me through email at sunil@nfontario.ca. I am looking forward to hearing from you!

*Warmly, Sunil Levinson Puri
Land-Linking and Young Farmer
Support Specialist*

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