

# FARM SITE EVALUATION

Land Use | Soils | Water | Infrastructure | Community

## Introduction to Site Evaluation

It is important to evaluate potential farmland before signing an agreement to lease or own property. In this resource, five aspects of site evaluation are considered: land use, soils, water, infrastructure, and community. **Land use** planning involves considering what your goals are for the land and if zoning and other local regulations allow for you to carry out your plans. Additionally, if you've lived in the West for any length of time, you know that **water** is a big deal. It is important to consider water source and quality. **Soils** are another key criteria to evaluate when assessing potential farmland. This resource outlines a few different ways to build an understanding of your property's soil capacity. As outlined in this resource, you should understand existing and needed **infrastructure** on the potential property with consideration to the type of agricultural business you want to start. Finally, this resource offers some points to consider about the **community** near your potential new space.



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**Farm Link Montana** is an online, statewide clearing house that offers a wide array of resources and tools to help connect beginning farmers and ranchers with on-farm employment, mentorship, and land. Farm Link is a project of the **Community Food and Agriculture Coalition**, a Missoula-based nonprofit organization dedicated to a future where houses, farms, and ranches thrive; people are well-fed and food secure; family farms are sustainable, successful, and supported within a community

food system; and farmers and ranchers can access the land they need. Visit our sites at [www.farmlinkmontana.org](http://www.farmlinkmontana.org) and [www.missoulacfac.org](http://www.missoulacfac.org) for more.

## LAND USE

Even if your potential site *seems* great for farming, there may be local regulations that restrict a variety of farm and business aspects, including your ability to grow crops, have a farm stand, or build on-site storage facilities or housing. Be sure to check in with your

**local planning and zoning office** prior to making any land agreement to make sure you will be able to do what you want to do on the land according to plans for your operation. You might even stop by their office *before* looking for land, as knowledge of regulations may help you narrow to a selection of certain areas in your county or city for your land search.

This office should also be able to direct you to other local government offices that you should check with before finalizing your plans. These might include **departments of environmental quality, food safety, business registration**, etc. All of these offices have different names in different counties so if you're not able to find what you're looking for right away, the **county courthouse** should be able to send you in the right direction.



potential site if you are planning to seek organic certification. Additionally, knowledge about what sorts of management practices were used on the land in recent years will be valuable; it may tell you about potential issues with residual chemicals, pests or weed seeds. The more well-rounded information you are able to get, the more encompassing and reliable information you'll have to make an informed decision about purchasing or leasing property.

### Resource List

- Your local planning and zoning office
- Montana Department of Environmental Quality: <http://deq.mt.gov/>
- Public Health Department: <http://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/FCSS/countytribalhealthdepts>

Considering **markets** is another important aspect of land use when looking for a site to farm. You'll want to examine the market potential of your area to determine what kind of operation will be financially viable in that area.

Finally, be sure to find out about the **history of the land in terms of past operations and practices**. Contact previous owners, neighbors and government offices. You must know the agricultural practices of the past three years of your

# SOILS

Soils are a key criteria to evaluate when assessing potential farmland. This resource outlines a few different ways to build an understanding of your property's soil.

To begin, you can perform a preliminary **“feel test”** on soils at your potential site. This involves evaluating the soil texture as you knead it into a ribbon shape. More information on how to perform this preliminary test can be found on the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Science (NRCS) website.



## Resource List

- Web Soil Survey: [websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/](http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/)
- NRCS: [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)
- USDA Service Center: [offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app](http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app)
- Montana State University Soil Lab List: <https://www.msuextension.org/category.cfm?Cid=21>

Also operated by the NRCS, the **Web Soil Survey (WSS)** provides soil data and information produced by the National Cooperative Soil Survey. When using this resource, keep in mind that the satellite images may not be up to date. For this reason, it is best not to use the WSS to assess current infrastructure on the property. It provides access to the largest natural resource information system in the world. NRCS has soil maps and data available online for more than 95 percent of the nation's counties and anticipates having 100 percent in the near future. The site is updated and maintained online as the single authoritative source of soil survey information.

To identify the exact soils on different areas of your land, consider taking some soil samples at various areas around the property and submitting them to a soil testing lab. For more detailed information, contact your local **USDA Service Center** or your **NRCS State Soil Scientist**. If you want to take a full soil core, you can often borrow the tools you'll need from your local Extension or NRCS office.

Additionally, while **Montana State University** no longer provides soil testing, their website lists soil testing labs you might consider.

# WATER

## Resource List

- National Flood Insurance Program: FEMA risk map. Retrieved at: <http://msc.fema.gov/portal/>
- Ground Water Information Center (GWIC): <http://mbmgwic.mtech.edu/>
- Water Rights Query System (WRQS): <http://wrqs.dnrc.mt.gov>

If you've lived in the West for any length of time, you know that water is a big deal. When researching a site to purchase or lease, you'll want to consider the water needs of your operation, and how those line up with the water availability at your potential site.

• **Water Rights:** You will need to have a water right for any water you plan to use on your farm. Water rights are assigned and have different restrictions based on the date they are issued. Though you may receive water rights information from the previous landowner, it is important to

verify your water rights in the **Water Rights Query System** so that you know what is in the books.

- **Water Testing:** Keep in mind quality and content when testing your water. If you are on city water you should be able to get a water quality report from the city. For rural areas you should work with an Extension Agent to determine the capacity of your water source in terms of your desired business practices, and how to go about testing.
- **Irrigation Districts** (surface water): In Montana, water is distributed through various irrigation districts across the state. Each functions a little differently and is a great asset in learning about your land and the water you'll have access to. Check with your local Extension office, realtor, or local government to identify which irrigation district governs your property.
- **Wells** (groundwater): You will need to apply to the state, and possibly local offices as well to get approval for a well you plan to drill on your property. Your local planning and zoning office should be able to direct you to the appropriate regulatory agencies in your community. If you're looking at a particular piece of land and wondering about well yields on your property and surrounding properties, check out the Bureau of Mines and Geology. **The Ground Water Information Center (GWIC)** at the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG) is the central repository for information on the ground-water resources of Montana.

## Key Questions to Consider

- What is the quantity of water allotted for the property? When do you have access to water? Is the access constant? Are there timing constraints to when you can access water?
- Is the available water safe to spray on crops? Do food safety regulations allow you to use it for post-harvest washing?

Remember that even if you get your water rights information from an alternative source, it is still wise to call and talk with the water district, talk to your neighbors, and to the current landowner to get the most accurate and helpful information.



# INFRASTRUCTURE



Depending on what kind of farm you want to have, your plan will most likely require some sort of infrastructure. It is good to take into account what structures are already available at your site, in addition to what structures you may or may not be able to build.

•**Fencing:** You will need appropriate fencing to contain livestock and/or keep wildlife out. You may choose to install permanent, portable, or temporary fencing, or a combination of methods depending on your operation's needs and the surrounding landscape. Your local NRCS office, Soil and Water Conservation District, and Extension offices may be able to provide insight into what sort of fencing is required and most effective. While there is not much governmental funding available for fencing projects, **Defenders of Wildlife** has an Electric Fence Incentive Program which offers 50% reimbursement towards the cost of an electric fence up to \$500 for securing grizzly bear attractants within specific counties in Montana.

•**Buildings and facilities:** Your operation may require barns, animal shelters, storage sheds for equipment, cooling facilities, washing and packing facilities, additional living spaces, or something else. It is important to assess the quality of existing structures on your potential farm site in addition to taking into account what you may need to build. You can then check with zoning restrictions and any easements on the property to see what capacity your land has for new buildings.

## Resource List

- Cornell University: <http://www.nebeginningfarmers.org/farmers/land/land-environment-facilities-tutorial/buildings-facilities/>
- NRCS: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/>
- Soil and Water Conservation District: <http://swcdm.org/>
- Defenders of Wildlife: [http://missoulacfac.org/images/DOW\\_2015\\_EFence\\_Incentive\\_Form.pdf](http://missoulacfac.org/images/DOW_2015_EFence_Incentive_Form.pdf)

•**Hoop houses and greenhouses:** If you plan to use hoop houses and/or greenhouses, you'll want to find out if there are any building restrictions. Greenhouse use requires particular considerations as you will want to be able to provide the necessary utilities to keep it heated.

Existing infrastructure on your potential farm site can be incentive or restrictive, and it's worth taking into account when planning.

## COMMUNITY



Last but definitely not least, it is important to consider the community around your potential new property. In agriculture, your neighbors can not only be a valuable resource for insight into land management practices of that particular area, but they can also impact your farm indirectly. It is worth getting to know your community.

While you will surely have opportunities to meet and get to know your neighbors once you've

moved onto a property, it is best to get a feel for what sort of community relationships exist before purchasing or leasing land. You may choose to introduce yourself to adjacent landowners on your own or with the help of your realtor, talk with the previous landowner about their opinion on neighbors and community relationships, or use another strategy to find out more.

You may want to ask what kinds of agricultural practices they use, and judge compatibility with your operation's goals. Farmers who have been in the area for a while will be a wealth of knowledge about irrigation practices, weather patterns, and more. They may even know about the history of your potential farm site. Plus, building good will is always a valuable use of time.

### Further Information & Contact

For further information and additional resources, please visit [www.farmlinkmontana.org/resources/](http://www.farmlinkmontana.org/resources/).

This resource was created by the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition of Missoula. Inquiries may be sent to [cfacinfo@missoulacfac.org](mailto:cfacinfo@missoulacfac.org).

