

Name: Jonathan Kilpatrick

Role: Farmer Education Director at Sustainable Farming Association

Location: Based in Alexandria and serves all counties in Minnesota

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Q. What is your role with SFA?

I direct the farmer-to-farmer consulting program, we have a whole team of farmer consultants besides myself that work with producers at SFA. Some people are really good with dairy, and some are better with market gardens. I grew up on a veggie farm, but we have people on the team who do that on their own farm. There are six farmers that work as consultants for us.

Q. What counties are you working in?

We work in any county in Minnesota, and even on farms out of state like in North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

Q. What is your background?

I grew up on an organic vegetable farm in upstate New York knowing agriculture was what I wanted to pursue. After high school I pursued an internship at Polyface Farm in Virginia and was selected for their apprenticeship program. After that, I managed a nonprofit farm in Vermont for a couple years. After I got married, we managed a ranch in Oklahoma for four years. When we had kids, we wanted to be closer to family, so we moved to Alexandria, and have been here for four years. Someone referred me to this position with SFA and the rest is history.

Q. What are your areas of expertise?

I would say most of my career has been focused on livestock, grazing, pasture management and direct-to-consumer marketing, sales, and farmers markets. Since coming to Minnesota and coming into contact with more cropping, my work has also included livestock integration in cropping systems and soil health. I do spend time analyzing and crunching numbers with farmers for the business side as well.

Q. What does it look like for a farmer to start working together with you or another SFA farmer consultant?

A lot of it is word of mouth. Some people hear about SFA from other organizations or through our newsletter. On the farmer support page of our website, we have a consulting request form that we have producers fill out for their farm that's pretty detailed. After that we do an initial interview to make sure we can meet their needs and make sure their farm is dedicated to following through what we're offering. Sometimes people just have a couple questions and don't need the yearlong mentoring, so in that case we wouldn't sign them up for the program. But if they want to revamp their farm system and make changes, they can sign up to work with us for an extended period.

What we're about is a farmer-to-farmer network, and the idea of the program is for farmers to learn from farmers because that's the best way to make the change. Conferences and field days can help get you started, but the personalized context with a consultant can really help.

Q. How can a farmer plan to meet with you or another SFA farmer consultant?

It's nice to see maps of their farm from FSA or Google earth, but it really depends on what they're wanting. For an enterprise analysis, I need numbers and records. For cover crops or soil health, I need their herbicide history, soil tests and nutrient inputs. Some farms start from scratch, and so for them we work our way up from the bottom.

But the most important thing is for the farmer to have an open mind and willingness to try new things. At SFA we're good at pushing the paradigm, and we like to joke that instead of thinking outside the box, we're burning the box altogether. When you see things through a different paradigm, that's where real change happens.

Q. What are the benefits for a producer working with you or another SFA farmer consultant?

One benefit of working with us is that we have eyes all over the place, so if someone calls me for help, I can help them connect the dots with our network. Having that broad view and hearing about what worked for the soil type in a certain area helps. We have a network of farmers and organizations that's really strong, and we also know people outside the state.

But the biggest benefit is that all the consultants at SFA are active farmers and are putting on their boots everyday just like the farmers we serve, so we understand what it's like and are down in the trenches with them.

Q. What advice do you have for farmers at the beginning of their soil health journey?

Don't underestimate how quickly you can make a change, or the power and economic impact of soil health on your farm. There's different ways to go about it, but understanding the soil health principles is really powerful. As far as accelerating your journey, don't

underestimate the impact of integrated livestock either. People that integrate livestock into their system have the fastest regeneration of the soil and are also the most profitable.