The Preferred Operator

9 ways technology helps professional farms and farm managers win, keep, and grow landowner relationships

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Why landowner relationship management is a competitive advantage for professional farms

Nothing is more fundamental to farming than the land itself.

With about 40% of all agricultural land in the U.S. being rented,[1] one of the most important jobs inside a growing operation is landowner relationship management. For medium and large farms, and for the farm managers who serve landowners, that job now spans dozens or even hundreds of owners, trusts, and heirs.

The landowner base is also changing. In Iowa, 55% of farmland is owned by someone who does not currently farm, including 20% owned by non-residents, and 53% of non-farming owners have no farming experience. In some counties, as much as 70% of acres are farmed by producers who do not own them.[3]

As land passes through generations and farms get larger, producers end up with more landowners to serve, which makes every interaction more complex.[3] Yet about one-third of leased acres in Iowa still have no written lease at all.[3]

Positive landowner relationships need on-time payments, regular communication, and professional processes. But many operations still run on an outdated, disorganized status quo: messy systems, fractured communication, and too many gaps where details fall through the cracks.

The operations that fix this do more than save time. They give landowners a reason to choose them, and to stay.

40%

of U.S. agricultural land is rented[1]

55%

of Iowa farmland is owned by non-farmers[3]

1 in 3

leased Iowa acres have no written lease[3]

1 USDA Economic Research Service, Land Use, Land Value & Tenure. www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/land-use-land-value-tenure/

3 Melissa O'Rourke, Iowa State University Extension, Communication strategies and resources (July 2023). www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/articles/orourke/OroJul23.html

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NEVER HAS THERE BEEN A MORE IMPORTANT TIME TO PROFESSIONALIZE LANDOWNER RELATIONSHIPS.

According to American Farmland Trust, more than **370 million acres** will be in ownership transition over the next **15 years**.[2] Many new owners will be heirs who live off the farm, have never farmed, and expect digital, on-demand information.

That raises the bar. Extension educators note that some landowners hire a farm manager precisely because they perceive a communication problem with their farmer.[4] Professional farm managers set the standard with regular updates, crop and market reports, financial summaries, and recommendations.[6] When a lease comes up, the operator who already communicates like a professional is the one landowners trust.

Professional landowner relationships help with:

Acre retention and growth: Landowners compare operators. A documented, responsive relationship keeps current acres and earns referrals to new ones.

Differentiation: In a crowded rental market, reports, portals, and consistent follow-through set your operation apart from the farmer down the road.

Succession planning: Organized records let the next generation of both farmers and landowners pick up where the last one left off.

Operational efficiency: Fewer hours spent hunting for leases, dates, and phone numbers means more time for the business.

2 American Farmland Trust, Keeping Farmers on the Land. farmland.org/keeping-farmers-on-the-land-read-more/

4 Kevin Brooks, University of Illinois Extension, Communication strengthens the farmer and landowner relationship (Feb. 14, 2023). extension.illinois.edu/blogs/farm-coach/2023-02-14-communication-strengthens-farmer-and-landowner-relationship

6 Stalcup Ag Service, 6 Ways to Build a Lasting Relationship with Your Tenant Farmer. www.stalcupag.com/blog/tenant-farmer-landowner-relationship/

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The status quo: What does landowner relationship management look like today?

In today's ag world, three main approaches guide landowner relationship management. Each may have worked in previous eras. But as operations scale to dozens of landowners and thousands of acres, each one has its own distinct pitfalls:

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MANUAL FOLDERS

By necessity, manual recordkeeping is how landowner relationships were managed for decades. Farmers didn't exactly have access to Excel or computers in the early 1900s.

But, as anyone who's ever had to dig through a pile of manila folders to find that one phone number they need can tell you ... this system can get messy, fast.

The filing system (if there is one) is usually in someone's head, and rarely documented. It's hard to quickly find what you need, and nearly impossible to hand off to a new employee or the next generation.

Risk of catastrophic data loss is also higher. If there's a fire or natural disaster, a farm could lose all its historical info, just like that. Not to mention human error. Someone mistakenly sweeps a couple pages into the trash — and a year down the line, no one can find that copy of the lease they need.

About **30-40%** **of farmers still use manual folders** to manage their landowner relationships. But they're leaving on the table a chance for a more proactive, professional system.

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SPREADSHEETS

The majority of farmers these days (about 60-65%) manage landowner relationships through spreadsheets. While this is often an improvement from hard-copy records, it can still be cumbersome, especially as the number of landowners grows.

"There's a spreadsheet for this and a spreadsheet for that, contacts here and contracts there, and everything else in another spot," said **Kassi Tom Rowland of Tom Farms in Indiana**. "Nothing is in one spot together and it gets messy when you have multiple people working in all those systems every day."

Trails of communication with landowners get lost. Spreadsheets may be able to handle numbers, dates, or contact info. But:

- There's no easy way to track emails, calls, or meeting notes.
- No spot exists to attach leases, soil tests, or other documents.
- Spreadsheets don't compute payments — or alert you when one is due.
- Landowners can't log in to see their own information.

They may be less laborious than wrangling file folders. But spreadsheets still don't offer the proactivity or big-picture visibility a professional operation needs.

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NON-AG CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM) SOFTWARE

A handful of growers today (less than 5%) use CRM tools to manage their landowner relationships. And while there are digital tools out there to manage business relationships, none of these is equipped to handle the unique complexity of agribusiness relationships.

At a typical sales organization outside agriculture, for example, 100 contacts are simply ... 100 contacts.

But in agriculture, a contact list is much more complicated. Landowners are rarely a solo person. They're trusts, estates, and layers of extended family members. Instead of managing 100 distinct contacts, you have to manage 100 family trees, each tied to parcels, leases, payment splits, and decades of history. Non-ag CRM platforms simply don't offer the capability to manage generational, land-linked data like this.

less than 5% of growers use CRM tools to manage their landowner relationships

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What landowners expect today

Communication can't be limited to one conversation at rent time. Iowa State University Extension recommends talking at least semi-annually, if not quarterly, and suggests a quarterly farm newsletter and an annual report to keep landowners informed.[3] Stalcup Ag Service recommends a spring check-in on planting plans and a fall harvest summary with yields and weather challenges.[6]

SPRING	SUMMER	FALL	WINTER
Crop plan, planting update, soil test results, rent installment	Field photos, newsletter, stewardship and improvement updates	Harvest summary, yields, weather, grain delivery records	Annual report, lease review, 1099s, renewal conversation

Extension educator Kevin Brooks lists what landowners increasingly expect to see: soil tests, liability insurance naming the owner, 10+ years of yield history, production records, yield maps, FSA and NRCS forms, tile maps with GPS waypoints, photos, and a narrative of the year.[4] He recommends keeping those records in a binder or on a computer so they look professional.[4]

Start by asking every landowner three questions

1. How often do you want to hear from us?
2. How do you want to be contacted?
3. What information do you want or need?

Recommended by University of Illinois Extension.[4]

3 Melissa O'Rourke, Iowa State University Extension, Communication strategies and resources (July 2023). www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/articles/orourke/OroJul23.html

4 Kevin Brooks, University of Illinois Extension, Communication strengthens the farmer and landowner relationship (Feb. 14, 2023). extension.illinois.edu/blogs/farm-coach/2023-02-14-communication-strengthens-farmer-and-landowner-relationship

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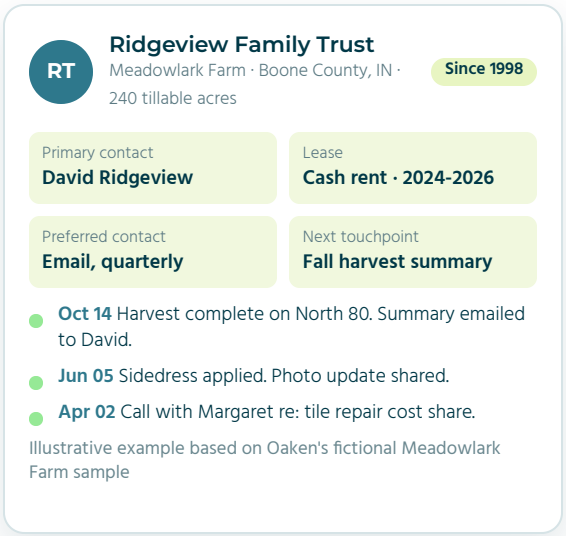
FARM CRM AND CONTACT MANAGEMENT

Landowner relationships are ... well, complicated. If a landowner changes their phone number, is the new one scribbled on a post-it note that you just hope will stay in the right folder? And if Landowner John passes away, who do you contact about your next lease renewal? His brother? His wife? His son?

A farm CRM built for agriculture keeps every landowner, trust, heir, and advisor in one place, linked to their parcels, leases, and payments. Oaken's landowner relationship management tools track communications, notes, and milestones, acting like a personal assistant for your land partnerships.[8]

Anyone on your team can get a crash course on a landowner before a call, without tracking down old email chains or notepads. You can also record each owner's communication preferences, so the right people get the right updates at the right cadence.



> "If anybody has 10 or more land partners they could see the value in an ag-related CRM," **Rowland said**. "As far as I'm concerned if you have these processes in place everything else gets much easier."

8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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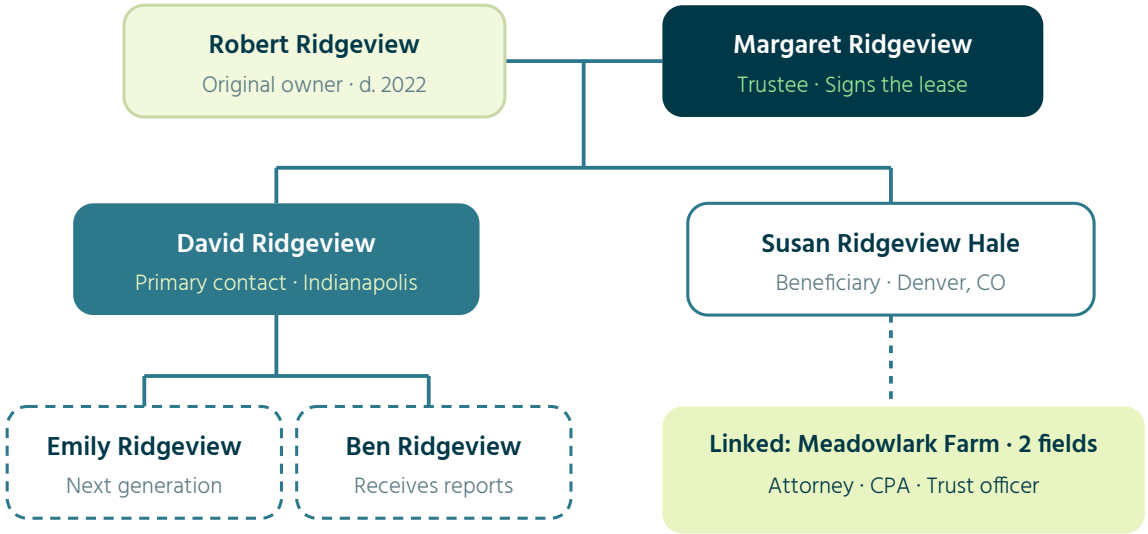
FAMILY TREE MAPPING AND SUCCESSION

Hundreds of millions of acres will change hands in the coming years.[2] When that happens on the acres you rent, the question isn't just who owns the land. It's who decides, who signs, who gets paid, and who simply wants to be kept in the loop.

Oaken lets you map how landowners are related in a family tree diagram, so you can see at a glance how a trust, its trustee, beneficiaries, and the next generation connect to each parcel. Maintaining family details and key dates is one of the tasks Oaken automates.[8]

That map protects the relationship through every transition. Just because Grandpa had 60 years of institutional knowledge doesn't mean his grandchildren, or your newest employee, will know it, unless there's a system that houses it.



Illustrative family tree for the fictional Meadowlark Farm landowner

2 American Farmland Trust, Keeping Farmers on the Land. farmland.org/keeping-farmers-on-the-land-read-more/
8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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KEY DATES AND A RELATIONSHIP CALENDAR

Leases run for different lengths of time with staggered end dates. Payment dates fall on different days throughout the year. And the personal moments, like a landowner's birthday or the anniversary of when the relationship began, are often the ones that matter most to the family.

Oaken brings all of it into one calendar: lease start and end dates, renewal and notice deadlines, payment due dates, birthdays, and relationship anniversaries. Automated notifications flag upcoming renewals, payments, and reporting deadlines,[8] so a card, a call, or a renewal conversation never slips.

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
		Mar 1 Rent installment #1	**Apr** Spring check-in		**Jun 18** Margaret's birthday		**Aug 12** 27-year relationship anniversary		**Oct 1** Non-renewal notice deadline	**Nov 1** Rent installment #2	**Dec** Annual report, lease review

● Payments ● Lease dates ● Birthdays & anniversaries ○ Touchpoints

Illustrative calendar using the fictional Meadowlark Farm lease terms

> Oaken customers have used the platform to keep track of "renewal dates, birth dates and other important anniversaries," with notifications for contract renewals, payments, and the people they haven't reached out to yet.[8]

8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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DOCUMENT VAULT AND LEASE MANAGEMENT

If you're worried about when a lease expires, you don't want to search your inbox for a copy, then comb through every page for the detail you need. Extension educators are clear: farmland leases should be in writing and clearly understood, not left to a handshake and a smile.[4,5]

Oaken stores leases alongside every key document tied to a landowner and parcel, with lease terms, start and end dates, payment amounts, and due dates captured in one system of record.[8] When a landowner, heir, or lender asks for something, it's a search away, not a box in the shop office.

Lease agreement & amendments	Soil test results	Liability insurance naming owner	FSA-578 & maps
10+ years of yield history	Tile maps & GPS waypoints	CRP / NRCS contracts	W-9s & 1099-NEC forms

Records Illinois Extension recommends farmers share with landowners[4]

> "Our contracts are anywhere from one-year to five-year contracts, so you're constantly renewing all those contracts at different times," **Rowland said. Her family farm has over one hundred land partners, encompassing thousands of acres.**

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5 FarmWeek, Communication strengthens farmer-landowner relationships. www.farmweeknow.com/opinion/perspectives/communication-strengthens-farmer-landowner-relationships/article_bff5e544-b47c-11ed-ab19-771dee2d7804.html

8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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PAYMENT MANAGEMENT

For most farmers, missing a land rent payment is one of their worst fears. Even if a landowner doesn't immediately take back the acres, the slip-up still puts a dent in the relationship. Stalcup Ag Service notes that reliable, on-time payment is part of what makes a tenant worth renewing year after year.[6]

At scale, payments get complicated: variable and flex rent, multiple payees within one family, split installments, and pass-through program payments. Oaken automates farm lease payments and financial tracking, built for variable rent structures, multiple payees, and detailed audit trails.[8] It computes payments, notifies your team when a due date is coming up, and keeps records of past payments, so reconciliation and owner statements are a breeze.

6 Stalcup Ag Service, 6 Ways to Build a Lasting Relationship with Your Tenant Farmer. www.stalcupag.com/blog/tenant-farmer-landowner-relationship/
8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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LANDOWNER REPORTS

Many leases already require an annual report to the landowner, and Iowa State University Extension calls it a key communication tool.[3] Professional farm managers routinely deliver crop and market reports, financial summaries, and recommendations.[6] Operators who do the same compete on equal footing.

Oaken turns your field, financial, and lease records into a plain-language landowner report. The sample for the fictional **Meadowlark Farm** in Boone County, Indiana includes:

- Executive summary, lease overview, and payments
- Field-by-field agronomy, from soil tests to yields
- Crop marketing, program payments, and financials
- Maintenance, stewardship, and weather narrative
- County cash-rent benchmarks and outlook
- Application and yield maps in an appendix

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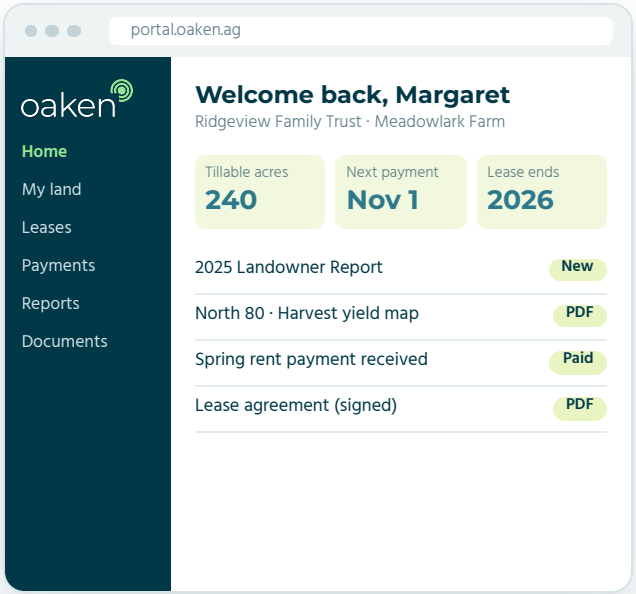
LANDOWNER PORTAL

More than half of Iowa's non-farming owners have no farming experience, and one in five owners lives out of state.[3] Many want to stay informed about what's planted and how crops are managed;[7] few want to wait for a phone call to find out.

Oaken's landowner portal gives each owner a secure login to their own land information: parcels and maps, lease terms, payment history, reports, and shared documents. Spreadsheets can't offer this.[8]

Owners and their advisors can self-serve answers at any hour. Your team spends less time fielding routine requests. And your operation looks like the professional partner it is.



Illustrative portal view using fictional sample data

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7 Nationwide, Farmland Lease Relationships: Landowner and Lessee. www.nationwide.com/lc/resources/farm-and-agribusiness/articles/farmland-lease-relationships

8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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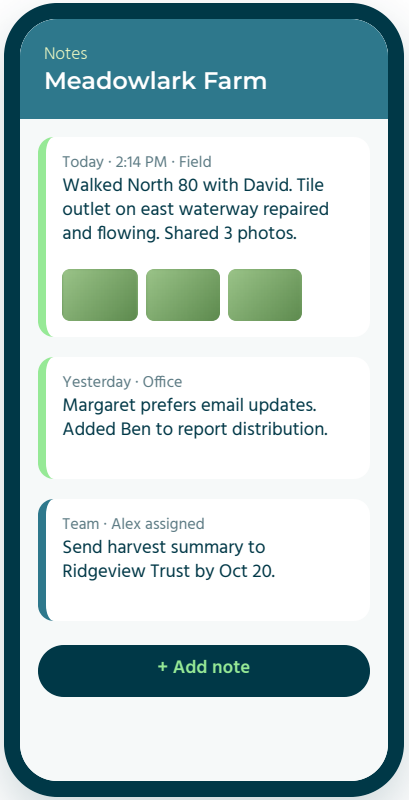
MOBILE APP, NOTES, AND TEAM UPDATES

Relationships are built in the field, not just in the office. The best moments to capture a detail are right after a conversation at the edge of a field, or while you're looking at the tile repair the landowner paid for.

With the Oaken mobile app, your team can access lease data and communication history from any device,[8] take notes on the spot, attach photos, and keep everyone updated. Meeting notes are consolidated automatically,[8] so the agronomist, the office manager, and the owner all see the same history.

Landowners notice the difference. Small, visible actions, like mowing road ditches or sharing a strong yield, build confidence that you genuinely care for the land.[7]



7 Nationwide, Farmland Lease Relationships: Landowner and Lessee. www.nationwide.com/lc/resources/farm-and-agribusiness/articles/farmland-lease-relationships
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RENTAL RATE DATA AND BREAKEVEN CALCULATORS

Rent is where trust is won or lost. Stalcup Ag Service advises being upfront when rent changes and basing the conversation on survey data and crop cost estimates, because landowners appreciate "seeing that you're basing changes on real numbers, not just gut feeling."[6]

Oaken gives your team free, public tools to keep landowners current on local rental rates, so every renewal starts from shared facts instead of competing opinions. Oaken's National Cash Rent Map covers 2,888 counties in 49 states with 17 years of USDA NASS rent data.[8,9]

2,888
counties with published cash rents[8]

49
states on the National Cash Rent Map[8]

17 yrs
of USDA NASS rent history[8]

KEEP LANDOWNERS UP TO DATE ON RENTAL RATES

National Cash Rent Map
USDA NASS county cash rents for cropland and pasture, with rank, percentile, and year-over-year trend

State & county rent pages
State-by-state county benchmarks to share with landowners before a renewal

Rent negotiation guide
Free 25-page guide with calculator walkthroughs and QR codes to Oaken tools

State lease templates
Free state-specific farmland lease agreement templates

6 Stalcup Ag Service, 6 Ways to Build a Lasting Relationship with Your Tenant Farmer. www.stalcupag.com/blog/tenant-farmer-landowner-relationship/
8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/
9 Oaken, US State & County Cash Rental Rates Interactive Map. www.oaken.ag/state-and-county-cash-rent-data
13 Oaken, Farmland rent negotiation guide. www.oaken.ag/farmland-rent-negotiation-guide

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RENTAL RATE DATA AND BREAKEVEN CALCULATORS

A professional operation can show the landowner how the numbers work, not just what the number is. Oaken's Cash Rent Calculator lets you enter yields, prices, and per-acre production costs, and its Tenant's Residual method estimates what the farm can afford to pay after costs, which is effectively the breakeven rent.[10]

The Flex Rent Calculator follows Iowa State's Ag Decision Maker method and adds a sensitivity matrix showing how rent changes as yield and price move, with a PDF download to share.[11]

Bring those views to the table and a hard rent conversation becomes a joint look at risk.

bu/ac \ $/bu	$3.75	$4.00	$4.25	$4.50	$4.75	$5.00
240	+$25	+$85	+$145	+$205	+$265	+$325
225	−$31	+$25	+$81	+$138	+$194	+$250
210	−$88	−$35	+$18	+$70	+$122	+$175
195	−$144	−$95	−$46	+$2	+$51	+$100
180	−$200	−$155	−$110	−$65	−$20	+$25

Illustrative corn margin per acre after $620 production costs and $255 cash rent (fictional Meadowlark Farm terms). Teal cells clear breakeven; rust cells fall short.

BREAKEVEN AND LEASE-RATE CALCULATORS

Cash Rent Calculator
Averages multiple methods, including Tenant's Residual, into a fair-rent range with a 2026 county benchmark

Flex Rent Calculator
Base-plus-bonus or revenue-share formulas with a yield and price sensitivity matrix and PDF download

Pasture & Grazing Rent
Stocking rates, animal unit equivalents, and county data for grazing leases

Grain Storage & Livestock Building Rent
Fair rates from bin capacity, drying, head capacity, manure handling, and utilities

10 Oaken, Farmland Cash Rent Calculator & 2026 County Benchmarks. www.oaken.ag/farmland-cash-rental-rate-lease-calculator
11 Oaken, Flexible Farmland Rent Rate Calculator. www.oaken.ag/flex-rental-and-lease-rate-calculator
12 Oaken, Farmland lease calculators. www.oaken.ag/land-lease-calculators

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Stand out in a crowded market

Nationwide's agronomy specialist encourages landowners and lessees to treat each other as business partners and part of the farm team, alongside the accountant, agronomist, and legal advisor.[7] Medium and large operations that run their landowner relationships that way give owners a clear reason to choose them.

	TYPICAL OPERATION	PROFESSIONAL OPERATION WITH OAKEN
Contacts	Phone numbers in a folder or someone's head	Farm CRM with family trees, roles, and preferences
Key dates	Remembered, or missed	Calendar of renewals, payments, birthdays, and anniversaries
Documents	Paper boxes and inboxes	Secure vault linked to each landowner and parcel
Payments	Hand-calculated checks	Computed payments, alerts, and audit trails
Updates	Once a year, at rent time	Quarterly touchpoints and an annual landowner report
Access	Owner calls and waits	Landowner portal with 24/7 self-serve information
Team	Knowledge lives with one person	Mobile notes shared across the whole team

"The best farms out there are a result of a strong and open relationship between the landowner and farmer," writes Illinois Extension's Kevin Brooks.[4]

4 Kevin Brooks, University of Illinois Extension, Communication strengthens the farmer and landowner relationship (Feb. 14, 2023). extension.illinois.edu/blogs/farm-coach/2023-02-14-communication-strengthens-farmer-and-landowner-relationship

7 Nationwide, Farmland Lease Relationships: Landowner and Lessee. www.nationwide.com/lc/resources/farm-and-agribusiness/articles/farmland-lease-relationships

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The future: data sharing across your trusted ecosystem

Technology is still evolving in the land management ecosystem. Oaken is at the front end of that evolution and is adding new features to help farms and farm managers improve their systems, relationships, and efficiency.

A land management platform improves contact, lease, payment, and reporting workflows, but it can be the foundation for much more. Nationwide notes that multi-year leases build trust and make long-term improvements like drainage tile, waterways, and soil health more practical.[7] Shared, verifiable records make those longer commitments easier for both sides.

Here are a few scenarios where centralized land data helps in the near future:

- **Conservation and certification**: Share soil samples, cover crop records, and practice data with an agronomist or program administrator, and show landowners the stewardship that protects their land value.
- **Farm lending**: If a bank needs to see leases or payment history, a robust platform can facilitate secure data sharing throughout the lending process.
- **Advisors and heirs**: Give a landowner's attorney, CPA, or trust officer the right level of access during estate and succession planning.

7 Nationwide, Farmland Lease Relationships: Landowner and Lessee. www.nationwide.com/lc/resources/farm-and-agribusiness/articles/farmland-lease-relationships

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Technology can empower better landowner relationships, efficiency, and continuity

Robust technology that's tailored to the unique needs of agribusinesses is more important than ever, especially for operations managing many landowners and thousands of acres.

Professional landowner relationship management improves productivity as well as acre retention. A farm CRM, family tree mapping, a calendar of key dates, a document vault, automated payments, landowner reports, a landowner portal, and a mobile app, plus transparent rent data and calculators, together turn good intentions into a repeatable system.

As farms across the country plan for succession, and as land passes to a new generation of owners, technology must be part of that process. Better operations mean smoother relationships, less stress, and more confidence that your systems will last into the next era of agriculture.

"At Oaken Ag, we saw that growers needed streamlined systems they could count on to better run their operations, and that they could pass on to the next generation," said **Oaken co-founder and CEO, Shashi Raghunandan**. "We built a digital land management platform to fill that gap, and because we could see how crucial it was for today's — and tomorrow's — farmers."

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About Oaken

Incubated by Purdue University's DIAL Ventures program, Oaken is the system of record for farmland lease management. Farms, farm managers, farmland investors, and their teams use Oaken to organize landowner data, automate leases and payments, and manage relationships in a single platform.[8]

See how Oaken helps your operation stand out.

Book a Demo

- Farm CRM
- Family tree mapping
- Key dates & birthdays
- Document vault
- Automated payments
- Landowner reports
- Landowner portal
- Mobile app
- County cash rent map
- Rent calculators

8 Oaken, Farmland Lease Management Software & Farm CRM. www.oaken.ag/

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