

Neighbors unite to buy local acres

By JOSH FLINT

ACROSS the country, many farmers now see their neighbors as competitors. At a recent land auction, it was refreshing to see a group of central Illinois farmers/neighbors bidding together, not against each other.

With 3,912 acres up for grabs, the Kilton Farms Inc. auction was one of the largest in recent history. By banding together, more than 20 farmers and investors from the Litchfield area were able to keep 2,462 acres locally owned.

According to group member Jeff Helgen, W.D. Kilton began amassing land about 70 years ago. When he died, the farm went to his widow, Dorothy Kilton. Then Dorothy died in June 2008. Her death sent a wave of rumors through the community.

Unique group

In November, local farmers began hearing the farm would be auctioned. Some tenants stood to lose a large portion of their acreage.

On Dec. 19, 2008, the group held their first meeting in Kevin Niemann's machine shed. "We talked and we decided we'd rather see neighbors keep it, instead of it going to a big corporation," Niemann explains.

When the auction commenced, the group totaled 23 members. The majority were tenants of Kilton Farms. However, some members were farmers looking to add new land, while others were investors.

The members included Mike Bitter, Jim Carriker, Brad Carriker, Don Fluchel, Brian Foiles, Steve Gartner, Joe Goeke, Jay Greenwalt, Lou Hallock, Bud Helgen, Mike Helgen, Jeff Helgen, Dave Helgen, Eric Helgen, Steve Heyen, Joe Jacobs, Kevin



WORKING TOGETHER: A combination of 22 farmers and investors purchased more than half of Kilton Farms' 3,912 acres. The landowners are happy the ground will remain locally owned.

Niemann, Dave Pastrovich, Brad Pastrovich, Bob Prevedell, Mike Schwab, Charlie Sinclair, and Chris Zimmerman.

Once the sale was wrapped up, the group walked away with nearly 2,500 acres at an average price of \$6,200 an acre. Dave Pastrovich was impressed with how well the group worked together.

"Out of the 26 tracts that were purchased, there wasn't any infighting among us," he notes.

In fact, as the auction went on, those who'd already secured their acreage helped out those who were still bidding. "As the bids went up and members of the group reached their max,

others in the group stepped up," explains Jay Greenwalt.

For the tenants who stood to lose a substantial portion of acreage, Helgen says it made sense to bid aggressively. "For some of us, it was cheaper to purchase the ground and spread our costs over the land, rather than reduce our operation," he explains.

The farmers weren't the only ones smiling after the sale. Steve Gartner says many of the urban community members realized how important it was to keep the land locally owned.

"We all support the local elevator and dealers," Gartner notes. "The city people were happy for us."

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