



## STEP 3 - HOW TO EVALUATE LAND

### CHOOSING THE BEST LOCATION

When looking for land to farm, you may be fortunate enough to take over an existing space with healthy soils and existing infrastructure. However you may also be considering converting land with no recent agricultural use, or with no history of farming. Regardless, when considering sites it is important to have a checklist of things to you will need to assess. This section is designed to help you think about what questions to ask and what to look for when you make a sit visit.

Remember, the perfect block will be almost impossible to find, so you may need to compromise. When evaluating land and when using our checklist, consider weighting the aspects you feel are most important.



#### Location

Think carefully about your location. You may be offered land with great soil and abundant water, which seems too good to be true, but is the location right for you? Is there access to a market for your produce?

There are multiple aspects to consider. Referring back to your business plan will help, as will reflecting on the following:

#### Customer base

How close are you to your customer base?

#### Diversified selling options

Do you have a mix of sales opportunities? Having a diversity of direct to consumer, retail, and wholesale options can be beneficial to your business. Consider the local food scene. For example, if you are hoping to grow a diverse range of heirloom vegetables is there a market for this nearby?

#### Transport to market

How will you be delivering your products? If you need third party logistics, are you close to existing transport routes, or is there a depot close by?

#### Transport to services

Consider how far you are from ag shops and other services. How far will you need to drive to get a replacement irrigation part or emergency animal feed?

#### Support network

Do you have a support network close by? Is the prospective land part of a like minded community?

#### Off farm jobs

If you have an off-farm job, how far do you need to travel between farm, home and work?



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### Zoning & Planning Schemes

Remember, not all land can be farmed in the same way. You may be seeking land for a specific enterprise, in which case it is important to make sure those farming activities are allowed on any land that you find. Local planning provisions may preclude, or assist, having tenants living on the property if there are other dwellings.

### Speak to the Local Council

It is key you speak to your local council so that you know how the council interprets the zoning & planning schemes, as there can be considerable differences from council to council.

You can visit Tasmania's [Plan Build](#) site to check an address for its current zoning. You can find out more about each of the zoning schemes [here](#).

[The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance](#) have recently published a useful [legal guide](#) that outlines all the planning and land use controls in Tasmania.

### Site Visit

It may seem obvious, but when it comes to assessing opportunities for land tenure, conducting a site visit is the number one priority. If you have the time, and permission from the landowner, try to visit the land on several occasions. If possible, visit during different weather conditions (ideally, you might visit during different times of the year, however this may present challenges).

### Digital Land Assessment Tools

While being on the land to assess its potential is crucial, you may need to make a relatively quick decision. In his [case study](#), Jake Wolki points out that sometimes you don't have time on your side, and in these instances, having resources that enable desktop research is useful.

Google Maps is one simple tool, however in Tasmania we also have an amazing free resource that can assist. The LIST (Land Information System Tasmania) is an online service that provides access to integrated land and property information and related services. [LISTMap](#) is one of these services, allowing users to view and create maps from hundreds of spatial datasets including natural resources, roads, community facilities, property boundaries (cadastre), aerial imagery and survey information. One useful dataset allows users to see what particular crops are suited to land.

NRM North have a really useful LISTmap guide for smallholders which you can download [here](#), or alternatively you can find the more comprehensive LISTmap user guide [here](#).





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### SITE ASSESSMENT

Below are the criteria we have identified as most important to consider when assessing a site. We have also created a site assessment checklist which has a more comprehensive list of considerations. This is available in the appendix or as a separate download.



#### **Infrastructure**

When assessing a site, consider what infrastructure exists and what is necessary for your enterprise. Below is a list of some of the most important things to consider:

- Workshops. Do you require a workshop? If so what size will you require, and what will the be used for? (For example, machinery maintenance).
- Cold storage. Is there a requirement for cold storage? Do you need to store harvested crops, or refrigerate meat in readiness for deliveries?
- Food processing. Do you need to process or value-add any of your products on site? What are the regulations and requirements for this happening on site?
- Farm gate stand. Do you want to sell your products to the community living near the farm? Will you need power/access/signage?
- Storage Sheds. Do you need to store feed, hay, or packaging materials? Do these need to be vermin proof?
- Animal shelters. Are you farming animals such as goats that require shelters during the night? Or chickens that need somewhere to roost at night and protection from predators?
- Polytunnels. If you are a market gardener, do you need to install polytunnels. As they are often fixed in one spot, designing where they will be located is important. The same applies for nursery areas where you raise seedlings.
- Packing sheds. Do you require a separate area for packing eggs? Or if you grow vegetables do you require wash pack stations? Ensure these are close to your production areas, are built according to regulations, and you have easy vehicle access for deliveries.
- Fencing. What type of fencing will you require? Are you able to utilise portable, electrified fencing, or will you need permanent fencing to keep out wildlife?
- Office space. Do you require a separate space for an office, and if you are planning a larger enterprise do you require infrastructure such as toilets and spaces for staff to have breaks?
- Do you need electricity? Wifi? Phone reception?

#### **Water**

When considering a site, find out what water sources are available. Is the site on town water, or will you be irrigating from dams or bores? If possible, ascertain the quality of your water. Is it alkaline or acidic? Does it contain any contaminants from on or off the farm?

Check with landowners if there are ever water shortages. Ask how the land responds to large rainfalls and do as much research as possible. Look at weather data to know your average rainfall, and if possible speak to other people in the area.

You also need to consider how well the farm's irrigation is set up. Does the property have existing pipes to areas of the farm that need irrigation, or to areas of the farm where livestock will need access to drinking water? Will you have access to pumps? If you are rotationally grazing stock, or regularly moving animals such as pigs or chickens to fresh pasture, how will you provide water to them? Are you able to tap into irrigation lines, or will you need to cart water.

If you are setting up a market garden, or a chicken enterprise, is there access to potable water, or options for treating water? Consider the local regulation requirements and costs if you need to set up your own system for treating water.



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### **Soil**

Knowledge of soil type and soil health is critical. Understanding soil types and knowing in advance what the soil composition is will help you understand what amendments might be needed and will assist with crop selection and suitability, irrigation practices, how to best avoid land degradation, and how to maximise productivity.

If you live in Tasmania, LISTMap is a useful resource for finding what type of soil is at a property.

Soil tests are fundamental when evaluating land, especially if you intend to lease for horticultural purposes. When assessing a site, ask the landowner if you can dig a hole and take a sample for analysis. Have your sample sent off to a laboratory and employ an expert to help interpret the results.

### **Climate**

Use weather data to find out rainfall, average temperatures, average number of frost days, the potential for extreme weather and predicted climate changes. Consider the way the sun tracks throughout the year, observe where the prevailing wind comes from, and if there are existing windbreaks or shelter belts. If possible, speak to neighbours or people in the area about the climate and history of climate related events.

It is also important to look at any microclimates that exist on the same property. These can be influenced by existing vegetation, buildings or water bodies which create unique environments. These can provide valuable opportunities for pushing the boundaries of what is possible.

A new free digital tool called My Climate View was recently launched by the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO as part of the Climate Services for Agriculture program. It offers local climate projections for 20 agricultural commodities and allows farmers anywhere across Australia to access local commodity specific climate information at a 5 km<sup>2</sup> grid around or across their properties.

### **Landform**

Things to consider when looking at the lay of the land include elevation; location of slopes, gullies and valleys; the aspect or direction a slope faces; how vegetation changes with the topography of the land and how this relates to frosts, sun/shade, and the movement of wind and fire.

What you farm determines the landform you need. For example, market gardeners will be looking for a relatively flat, hopefully fertile site, which might cost more per acre, whereas livestock farmers may be able to lease cheaper land that is hillier and unsuitable for growing crops.

Other things to consider include how many acres of land you will need in your first season. Do you want to be able to increase the number of acres you are farming in future, and if so, how many more acres do you think you might need? Is a property map available and attached to the lease and are all parties involved clear on property boundaries and uses?

### **Power & connectivity**

Power is needed to keep most farm businesses functioning on some level.

Consider:

- What tools/pumps/equipment/processing will you need that will require power.
- Specific power needs such as three phase connections.
- How power is metered across the property.
- How you will be managing your business while on the farm - for example, access to wifi or phone signal to take calls, make sales, and access resources like planting guides.



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### **Access**

The are many aspects to consider when looking at access to a potential site:

- Where are the pathways to infrastructure?
- Where will heavy foot traffic be?
- How do you access the production area?
- How can vehicles access the production area (to deliver compost or to load up with produce for deliveries)?
- How will internal tracks affect water flow?
- How does the topography interact with internal tracks?
- Is there quick access around the property, especially to high traffic areas such as sheds and water points?
- Are any forms of agritourism allowed (farm dinners, weddings, tours, education courses etc.)? Are these activities allowed under local government regulations?

### **Housing**

Affordable housing is a real barrier for many trying to kick start their agricultural career. If you are seeking land to farm, you may be offered a suitable plot with great soil, water, and existing infrastructure, however it may be remote with little to no housing options close by. It may sound obvious, but finding somewhere to live that's close to available land is not always easy.

If you are a land owner and you are keen to share your land, you should also consider the housing options you can offer. You may be keen to have people farm some or all of your land, however you need to recognise that simply offering land without understanding housing considerations may be a barrier for many. Do you have housing on your property? If not, what are the nearest rental options? How far away is it, and will this travel be realistic for someone using your land? Can you talk to people in your local community about what you are hoping to do, and whether they have any opportunities for housing those that may farm your land?

### **Invisible structures**

Paying attention to invisible structures, or unseen social and economic factors, is often overlooked. These can be anything from personal finances to council regulations, or that you may want to run a certified organic farm but have neighbours who spray herbicides. Determining a market for your produce, and for societal visibility are also examples of invisible structures.

Market demand for specific crops or livestock and profitability of different agricultural products can influence a site, as can community and cultural considerations. For example, farms in areas with strong agritourism industries may lead you to consider incorporating visitor facilities or activities as part of your enterprise.

### **Farm Plan**

It's a good idea to check with the landowner if they already have a land management plan or whole farm plan. Each farm plan is contextualised to that location but this document will likely include a high-level overview of the farm's layout, any commitment to specific farming practices e.g. regenerative, and overall approach to land management now and into the future.

If considering moving towards organic certification, use the farm plan to review if buffer zones are in place to avoid contamination from neighbouring properties. These zones can be in the form of fallow areas, tree and shrub zones or roadways. Refer to the Australian Certified Organic Standards for recommendations on how these should be set out.

You can find more information on land management plans in [Step 5](#).





## STEP 3 - HOW TO EVALUATE LAND

### RESOURCES

#### CHOOSING THE BEST LOCATION

##### Zoning

- [Plan Build Tasmania](#) - an enquiry and application portal for planning, building, plumbing, public and environmental health information for property development in Tasmania
- [Information on Tasmania's Planning Scheme](#)
- [The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance's Legal Guide for Farmers has information on planning and land use controls](#)

##### Digital land assessment tools

- [Land Information System Tasmania](#) and specifically [LISTmap](#)
- NRM North have a really useful LISTmap guide for smallholders which you can download [here](#), or alternatively you can find the more comprehensive LISTmap user guide [here](#).

#### SITE ASSESSMENT

- [Appendix 3 has a comprehensive site assessment checklist for you to use.](#)
- [My Climate View](#)
- [The Young Agrarians guide covers site assessment criteria](#)



Photo Credit: Alastair Bett