

Who Benefits from these Divisions?

Here's Why LSP Sees a Connection Between Soil Stewardship & Social Justice

By Doug Nopar

One outgrowth of the 2016 campaign for the Presidency of the United States was that there is now a lot of talk about people being divided in this country: rural vs. urban, white vs. black, immigrants vs. native-born. For the benefit of all farming communities, must we be divided? Or can we unite across all these supposed boundaries? That's a key question the Land Stewardship Project is grappling with these days.

This winter, we set aside a bit more time at meetings in rural southeastern Minnesota to explain why LSP takes the positions (occasionally controversial) we take and why we work the way we do, particularly in the arena of fighting excessive corporate power and working for racial justice.

As an organization, we're not going along with all the divisions that supposedly are inevitable in rural America. Instead, we see tremendous concern among a wide spectrum of people of all backgrounds about the kinds of things that LSP cares about, like:

→ The amount of excessive corporate power and control there is in the country, and that everyone but farmers makes money off agriculture. (Cargill scored record profits in 2016 at the same time that grain, dairy and cattle prices were in the dumps.)

→ The lack of affordable healthcare and health insurance for farm and working class families, and the fact that young people want to come home to farm but can't leave behind the health insurance that comes with their urban jobs.

→ Misguided federal farm policy, which for so long has not been good for the soil and water, the majority of farmers or farmworkers, nor small town life.

In a way, LSP's work to involve a wide variety of people in our efforts to create a new food and farm system traces its roots to our early days of rural organizing. When LSP first started in 1982, the organization's main concern was soil erosion. That's still a major area of work for us, but we also learned a long time ago that the issue of soil stewardship was not an island unto itself, that all things in agriculture are connected, whether it's erosion, water quality, the number of farmers on the land, farm and trade policy, even healthcare and racial justice.

We've learned that we can't expect farmers to do an excellent job of caring for the soil when, as a society, we're continually



LSP members and staff regularly participate in events like this one, which was a march and rally calling for immigration reform. We will not have a truly sustainable food and farm system until all people involved are treated fairly. (LSP Photo)

putting them in an insecure financial position, on a roller coaster of farm prices with no affordable health insurance and no easy way to get the next generation started. That's not an excuse for farmers to not individually be looking at strategies to improve stewardship on their own operations—we certainly need that. But as a society, we need much more in terms of public policy if we want to have large-scale changes on the land.

As a society, if we want to better care for the soil that nurtures us, we must realize that there are a variety of other significant

changes that need to occur so that farmers can feel genuinely supported in caring for the land. That includes affordable healthcare for all, racial justice and equity in our food system, access to and ownership of farmland for people of color and native people, the fair treatment of immigrant farmworkers, and a federal farm policy that fully rewards stewardship of the land while providing financial security for family-sized farms.

Speaking of that last issue, today a big potential "uniter" for people representing all walks of life is the desire for a fair and just farm and food policy. This policy impacts all of us. At LSP, we're ready to work with everyone that wants to see change in this area, whether it's:

→ Longtime Minnesota farmers growing tired of Farm Bill benefits going disproportionately to the largest farms, and distorting planting decisions away from what's good for the land.

→ Immigrant farmworkers, most of whom are farm and rural people displaced from their own farms and villages in Mexico by U.S. farm and trade policy.

→ Refugees from rural southeast Asia highly skilled at raising produce having trouble finding land to farm.

→ Native Americans taking back control of their own food supply, something they call "food sovereignty."

→ Descendants of black slaves and African immigrants starting urban farms for their communities.

In truth, as farm and rural people, we can't develop the reforms we want on our own. And to fundamentally change the system, we're going to need the grassroots participation of all kinds of people, regardless of race, or what country we were born in. Everyone in, no one left out. It could take us

a long time to get there, but we're going to keep working for it, and not allow ourselves to be artificially divided from one another by powerful interests and giant corporations that would prefer we were fighting with each other, rather than challenging them as a united front. □

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