2020 State Legislature
Making Our Voices Heard in Saint Paul
LSP Members Successfully Push for Response to Farm Crisis

Amanda Koehler

The past few months have been harder than ever for thousands of Minnesotans. Our communities were already facing a serious farm crisis, inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare, the increasing impacts of climate change, corporate consolidation across our economy, and more. Now, on top of that, a pandemic has wreaked havoc on our healthcare system, farm and food system, and local and regional economies.

Yet, in the face of uncertain and unprecedented circumstances, Land Stewardship Project members and supporters pulled together during the regular session of the 2020 Minnesota Legislature to build and assert our collective power:

➔ More than 100 members from 66 communities across the state met with their legislators remotely to lobby for LSP’s most urgent legislative priorities, leading to legislative wins.
➔ More than 580 LSP members and supporters attended powerful organizing meetings to take action on the farm crisis.
➔ Over 4,000 member and supporter contacts were made with legislators and the Governor’s office.
➔ More than 2,000 LSP members and supporters, primarily farmers, signed onto our Farm Crisis Petition, calling for the Governor, state legislators, the Attorney General, and the U.S. Congress to stand up for farmers and rural communities.
➔ LSP members directly advocated with key state-level decision-makers, including Attorney General Keith Ellison, Commissioner of Agriculture Thom Petersen, and top advisers in Governor Tim Walz’s office.

As a result of these efforts, LSP members and supporters — with notable farmer leadership — achieved tangible legislative wins that will keep farmers on the land in the face of compounding crises. Three Land Stewardship Project bills passed with unanimous or nearly unanimous support in the Legislature — support that is rare across all issue areas. We:

Extended deadlines in the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act through harvest (Dec. 1). This gives farmers in mediation time to plant and harvest, understand new market conditions and emergency government assistance, and respond to the compounding crises. This bill passed 134-0 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Minnesota Senate, and was authored by Rep. Todd Lippert (DFL-Northfield) and Sen. Mike Goggin (GOP-Red Wing).

Secured $175,000 to establish a new grant program to assist farmers in mediation with the cost of restructuring a loan. Grants will cover up to 50% of the origination fee. This bill was incorporated into the Omnibus Agriculture Finance Bill and passed 133-1 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Senate. The original bill was authored by Rep. Lippert and Sen. Goggin.

Secured an additional $60,000 for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Farm Advocates Program. This program works with legal advisers to help keep farmers on the land by letting them know their rights when faced with foreclosure, assisting in mediation and negotiations with lenders, and providing critical guides and resources. This bill was incorporated into the Omnibus Agriculture Finance Bill and passed 133-1 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Minnesota Senate. The original bill was authored by Rep. Jeff Brand (DFL-St. Peter) and Sen. Gary Dahms (GOP-Redwood Falls).

See pages 10 and 11 for more information on how the above bills impact crisis support available to farmers.
Helped secure $100,000 in grant money for smaller meat and poultry processors to expand their capacity in the wake of temporary closure of other large processors; and $100,000 in grants for farmers and value-added food processors whose operations were affected by COVID-19.

For more on the meat processing issue, see pages 6 and 12.

**Bold Action Together**

We know that the progress that was made this legislative session was because of the work LSP members did together. We started with being told that our bills were “long shots” and ended up with unprecedented support in the House and Senate. We know what is possible when we come together and make our voices heard — and it can’t stop here. The critical legislation we achieved together this session represents largely short-term solutions. Right now, we must build on what we accomplished in order to achieve long-term, systemic changes.

**Where the Legislature Fell Short**

Our Legislature failed to take bold action on many of the systems that are failing Minnesotans:

There was no movement on building a high-quality, affordable, and accessible healthcare system for all Minnesotans. The MinnesotaCare Buy-In bill, which would allow Minnesotans, regardless of their income, to “buy into” MinnesotaCare, did not receive a hearing; neither did our bill to allow farmers in mediation, regardless of their income level, to qualify for MinnesotaCare. While a public health crisis brings society to its knees, leaders on all sides are failing to act on healthcare.

There was no pause placed on the expansion of the mega-dairy industry (dairies over 1,000 animal units). Because of the work of LSP members and legislative allies, moratorium bills were introduced in the House and Senate. Although we sparked a conversation, it isn’t enough. These mega-dairies depress the price of milk for small and medium-sized dairies, putting them out of business while polluting our air and water. More work lies ahead if we are to stop consolidation from driving most of our producers off the land. We need more state leaders to put farmers and rural communities above corporate interests.

Despite the effects of climate change becoming increasingly common and severe, our Legislature did not take bold action on this crisis. As farmers and rural communities experience unprecedented floods, unpredictable weather, and a changing economy, we need our state to respond with solutions that match the scale of what we are facing. COVID-19 has taught us that our economy is neither nimble nor resilient to crises, and we must be prepared as the climate crisis continues to take hold.

**Bridging the Distance**

We may be physically distant, but we can shift the public narrative and move decision-making bodies when we assert our collective power as people who want to take bold steps to secure a fair, just, and sustainable future for our communities.

Farmers must start listening to each other, rather than agribusiness, whose interest is not the interest of farmers or their rural communities. Farmers and allies must be in solidarity together — farmer, farmworker, rural, urban — to work to advance our collective interest. We must understand what connects public health and fair working conditions with economic justice for farmers, workers at processing facilities, and all Minnesotans.

When we come together across geography, class, race, gender, religion, political party, citizenship status, ability, and more, we have the power to achieve a vision that centers around all people and the world we live in.

Land Stewardship Project organizer Amanda Koehler can be reached at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.

**Latest LSP Organizing & Social Change Cohort Convened**

This summer, the Land Stewardship convened its third annual — and first virtual — Organizing and Social Change Cohort. Through this cohort, 20 LSP members from across Minnesota and Iowa were trained to be community organizers, wrestled with power and structural oppression, and were equipped to build the power we need to transform the farm, food, and healthcare systems together.

Participants were trained to build organizing skills, such as running effective lobby meetings, having intentional one-to-one meetings with neighbors, and digging to the root of an issue. They also discussed how to change the story about the biggest challenges our communities face.

For more information on the Organizing and Social Change Cohort, contact LSP’s Amanda Koehler at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.
E ven before the pandemic struck earlier this year, Midwestern farmers were experiencing very difficult times. Low commodity prices due to trade disruption, high land costs, and consolidation of the dairy industry in the face of declining demand have driven Minnesota farmers to the brink, and in the case of nearly 300 family dairy farmers last year, over the brink, into bankruptcy.

Then came COVID-19. The first shock to agriculture came as schools, restaurants, hotels, and institutional cafeterias closed. Half-pint milk cartons destined for schools could not be readily switched to gallon jugs for retail markets. But the cows kept producing, and milk was dumped.

As a result of closed institutional and restaurant markets, sales of vegetables and other produce disappeared, literally overnight. In fact, farmers up and down the food system saw prices plunge, yet consumers did not see lower food prices. The price of processed beef almost doubled this spring and beef packers saw their profit margins reach historic highs, according to USDA statistics. It doesn’t make sense, and is a prime example of just how highly concentrated corporate power has become in our food and farm system — even the basic laws of supply and demand don’t apply anymore.

The next shock from COVID-19 came as the virus spread through the workforces of numerous large meat processors in Minnesota and nearby states. As hundreds of workers came down sick and dozens started dying, the plants shut down. Farmers lost their markets overnight. With no place to go, pigs and poultry were euthanized. Meanwhile, demand at food shelves exploded as people were thrown out of work by the pandemic.

Farmers working on thin margins already faced insolvency. Many of us mobilized, came together, and proposed immediate emergency measures to prevent a repeat of the 1980s farm crisis when panicked lenders forced farmers to pay up immediately, forcing many off their land and out of farming, permanently harming rural communities.

In a matter of weeks this spring, the Minnesota Legislature (see page 8) heard our voices and passed three crucial farm crisis measures nearly unanimously (there was a single dissenting vote):

➔ Farm foreclosures were delayed through harvest (Dec. 1) for farmers exercising their right to mediation of farm debt over $15,000. This will give time for crops to mature, markets to rebound, COVID-19 outbreaks to be managed, and federal support to be delivered.

➔ Additional funds were provided to increase the availability of Farm Advocates. These Minnesota Department of Agriculture employees work directly with farmers in trouble to guide them to available assistance and financial mediation with lenders. They provide an experienced shoulder to lean on through all kinds of trouble, and are a critical resource, especially during a crisis.

➔ A grant program under the Rural Finance Authority of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture was created and funded to share the cost of fees associated with transitioning loans to government-backed loan guarantees through the Farm Service Agency.

Senator Mike Goggin (R-Red Wing) and Representative Todd Lippert (D-Northfield), as chief authors of legislation related to mediation extension and loan restructuring grants, deserve our thanks for exercising their leadership. As Senate and House agriculture leaders, Senators Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake) and Bill Weber (R-Luverne), along with Representatives Jeanne Poppe (D-Austin) and Rod Hamilton (R-Mountain Lake), recognized the need for urgent action and guided these temporary, emergency measures forward. But these measures alone are not enough.

As the examples we cite here make clear, the pandemic has shown that our existing food production, processing, and distribution systems are not resilient and do not function well when under stress.

➔ Our livelihoods as farmers are dependent upon access to food processing facilities where safe working conditions, paid sick leave, and affordable healthcare are guaranteed for workers — many of whom are people of color, immigrants, and refugees. Food workers and farmers are in this together. When workers get sick, people suffer, our farms suffer, and we depend upon government aid to rescue us — which we do not like to do.

➔ Concentration of food production in large facilities controlled by a handful of corporations risks massive disruption to supplies when a disease causes shutdowns. The disease can be human, or, as we experienced a few years ago with avian flu, livestock-based. Government steps in to supply aid to large corporations and producers, but what about the small producer who is told to “just stop raising pigs for a while” as the market glut of confinement hogs is churned through the system?

We can and need to do better.

We are proud to be raising good food to feed our neighbors. We live in one of the world’s most productive agricultural regions. Let’s work together to find ways to develop a strong, resilient food production and delivery system that provides farmers a fair price at the farm gate, and that provides food workers fair wages and safe working environments. Economic justice for farmers and food workers is essential if we are to raise, process, and deliver a reliable supply of safe, affordable, and healthy food for all. Please step forward to join us in building a more resilient food system. ☐

For more on how you can join in the fight for fair prices for farmers, competitive markets, support for small processing plants, and economic justice for processing plant workers, contact LSP’s Paul Sobocinski at 507-342-2323 or sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org. See page 11 for details on new farm crisis resources available to farmers.
Farmers: Be Aware of Your Rights Under Loan Guarantee Fee, Other Changes

2020 Legislation Includes New Farm Crisis Resources

Building a Fight Back Together

The Land Stewardship Project recognizes that this is a time of compounding crises for farmers and rural communities. There are systemic forces in the food system that are pushing out small to mid-sized producers who are the backbone of rural communities, and threatening our communities’ access to land and clean water. On top of that, we are in the midst of an economic crisis that has had significant impacts on farm markets and has increased the immediacy of those risks. During this last legislative session (see page 8), Land Stewardship Project members came together to help pass numerous bills into law, including two that immediately help farmers experiencing financial stress ride out this economic crisis. We are sharing information on these and other changes here so that you are aware of the new resources made available and the extension of existing rights that you have.

Extending Farmer-Lender Mediation

As part of the response to the COVID-19 economic crisis, The Minnesota Legislature passed a bill brought forward by the Land Stewardship Project to extend the time frame for the right to farmer-lender mediation from 90 days to 150 days, or Dec. 1, 2020, whichever is later. This bill also expands eligibility requirements to include farmers who initiate mediation under the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act. These changes would be effective retroactive to the original date of enactment of the original COVID-19 response act that passed the Legislature on April 16, 2020. The Farmer-Lender Mediation Act requires a bank or other creditor to offer mediation to an eligible farmer before enforcing a debt against agricultural property such as land, livestock, or crops. Specifically, the act applies to foreclosure, repossession, cancellation of a contract for deed, and execution of a court order or judgement.

Loan Guarantee Fee Grant for USDA Restructuring Farm Loans

As part of this year’s farm appropriations bill, the Legislature set aside money for fiscal year 2020 until Dec. 1 to start a Loan Guarantee Fee Grant for the USDA Restructuring Farm Loans Program as a supplement to the debt restructuring loan program backed by the USDA.

This program mandates that the Minnesota Department of Agriculture provide grants to eligible farmers that cover 50% of the fee for a loan guarantee for a USDA Restructured Farm Loan so that farmers can keep their focus on just getting their debt restructured, and not add more on top of it. To be eligible, farmers must have a net worth of less than $800,000, be participating in farmer-lender mediation or have received a mediation notice pursuant to the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act, and have been approved for a debt restructuring loan guaranteed by the USDA. To apply for the grant program, farmers must contact the Rural Finance Authority at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Minnesota Farm Advocates

• Bruce Lubitz, Perham, 218-346-4866
• Connie Dykes, Lake City, 651-345-5149
• Dave Elliasson, Isle, 320-676-3559
• David Hesse, Comfrey, 507-877-3012
• Dan Hunz, Waverly, 763-772-6687
• Ruth Ann Karty, Clarkfield, 320-669-7135
• George Bosselman, Fosston, 218-200-9432
• Steve Zenk, Danube, 320-894-2517
• Wayne Pike, Rochester, 507-251-1937
• Robert Stommes, Saint Cloud, 320-443-5355

To find an advocate near you, see www.mda.state.mn.us/about/commissionersoffice/farmadvocates. The advocate hotline is 1-800-967-2474.

Moving Forward with Our Fight Back

It would not have been possible to pass the farm crisis policy changes described above without people pulling together during the Land Stewardship Project’s farm crisis meetings, our members working together to lobby their local officials, and, in general, farmers organizing so that we could move forward together. These are emergency measures that everyone now has a right to, but we still need to address the root causes of the farm crisis. And we can only do that if we continue to come together and move forward together. We at the Land Stewardship Project want to invite you to join us in this fight back today. Find more information at www.landstewardshipproject.org, or contact one of the LSP organizers listed below:

• Jessica Kochick — jkochick@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-722-6377
• Tom Nuessemeier — tomm@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-995-3541
• Matthew Sheets — msheets@landstewardshipproject.org
• Paul Sobocinski — sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-342-2323

Contact Your Local Farm Advocate

If you are experiencing financial stress, are receiving collection letters from creditors, and want to make sure that you can take advantage of these new rules, your first call should be to your local Minnesota Farm Advocate. They are the people who can quickly and efficiently help you navigate this process. The sidebar to the left has the numbers and locations of all the Farm Advocates in Minnesota. You can also find that information on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s website: www.mda.state.mn.us/about/commissionersoffice/farm.

If a creditor is not honoring the new extension of mediation that you have a right to, you need to call your local Farm Advocate right away. If you are willing to share information about how the mediation extension is not being honored, letting LSP know that this is happening is also extremely helpful for our advocacy work going forward.

Additional Resources Available for Dairy Farmers

The COVID-19 Food Assistance Program for dairy producers has been activated and is being offered through local Farm Service Agency offices. This federal funding came as part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and provides an extra payment for milk production of $4.71 per hundredweight for the months of January, February, and March. Also, federal Commodity Credit Corporation funds of up to $1.47 a hundredweight are potentially offered for the months of April, May, and June. You need to contact your local Farm Service Agency office to take advantage of this program. You can find more information on this funding online at www.farmers.gov/coronavirus.