

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,

→ 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



Land Stewardship Project members gathered in Mankato, Minn., in February to discuss public policy options for dealing with the farm crisis. State Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison attended the meeting and listened to people's concerns. (LSP Photo)

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:

→ LSP members bravely told their personal stories from the front lines of this crisis by speaking to the media and testifying at the Legislature, elevating their voices on behalf of many.

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.

Legislature, see page 9...



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. □

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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.

