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 cost 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 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 Nuesmeier — tomm@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-995-3541
• Matthew Sheets — msheets@landstewardshipproject.org
• Paul Sobocinski — sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-342-2323