

# A People's Agenda

## Giving Voice to the Needs of Rural Communities

Jessica Kochick

Hannah Bernhardt runs Medicine Creek Farm with her husband, Jason, and their young son, Harvey, where she raises pastured pigs, lamb, and cattle in a managed rotationally-grazed system just outside of Finlayson, in north-eastern Minnesota. Jason is in the process of reconstructing a barn with the original wood from an 1880s-era farm he transported all the way from Amboy, in southern Minnesota. About an hour north of Medicine Creek Farm, almost to the tip of Lake Superior, Timothy Soden-Groves lives with his wife, Diane, in Carlton, Minn. He is a freelance writer, musician, and humorist, and creator of The Rickety Desk of Mothy Groves, an artist's variety site where one can listen to the musical compilations of Timothy and Diane, featuring melodic vocals, guitar, harmonica, and even the concertina. Head south and then follow the Mississippi River down to the Driftless Area, where Tim Ahrens lives on a farm with his wife, Melia, in Altura, Minn. Together, they run a design-focused custom apparel company.

These Land Stewardship Project members, across differences in geography, occupation, and life experience, share an interest in making their rural communities heard. The story told about rural America — especially during this politically polarized time — is often a paper doll version of reality.

“Go big or go home” is the mantra we hear from corporate ag and often government as the only future for agriculture, and a stark urban-rural divide is built upon a claim that the people on either side of the line have irreconcilable differences when it comes to basic values. But this is not the whole story. It doesn't represent innovative small farmers, families trying to make ends meet, or the diversity of race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds that can make rural communities strong.

For this reason, People's Action is working with LSP and other rural-based organizations across the country to develop a different agenda — one grounded in the needs and lived experiences of people, rather

than the demands of big business. While decisionmakers at all levels of government speak to the importance of rural America, they often hold up the paper doll version, support the biggest players, and then say their work is done. A special People's Action report, *Relief, Recovery and Reimagination: A Federal Policy Agenda to Meet this Moment in Rural and Small Town America*, challenges that corporate-driven approach, and through the contributions of

### Relief, Recovery and Reimagination

A Federal Policy Agenda to Meet this Moment in Rural and Small Town America



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rural people, puts forward a bold, progressive alternative that if acted on, could bring much needed change. It has been a tough year in many ways, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the crisis could lead the way to a more stable and just future if we demand it.

As Ahrens says, “This is an opportunity for the government to work for the people again. In southeast Minnesota we could reach a point where our chief export is agricultural waste in the form of manure. This report lays out an opportunity for the government to correct that trajectory and help us build the wholesome communities that we need.”

The People's Action agenda was

released in late August, during the summer height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rural America's economic crisis began long before that. For generations, corporate consolidation, particularly in agriculture, has harmed rural families, soil and water quality, and local, democratic control. Consolidation in the food supply chain has led to food insecurity in both rural and urban communities, as the COVID-19 pandemic lays bare. Yet the political establishment continues to support this model of agriculture, all the while ignoring the gutting of wealth in rural communities and the vulnerability of people across the food system.

“Even people I politically disagree with voice concerns that the wealth is leaving their communities — they see the impact on their children, and know that if their children leave, they're not coming back,” says Soden-Groves. “Real inequities are built into the system that we seem to be unwilling to address and challenge.”

The long-term disinvestment from rural communities is addressed head-on in the People's Action agenda, which is organized into three categories: immediate COVID-19 relief; longer term economic crisis recovery, and finally, a structural reimagination that addresses things like access to healthcare, affordable housing, and a transition to a regenerative agricultural model that improves community health and the environment.

Bernhardt is profiled in the report for the regenerative practices she uses on her farm. She got involved in federal policy work through LSP and other organizations to ensure a voice for agriculture within climate activism. She notes a poll done by the Union of Concerned Scientists (<https://bit.ly/2Ia6xYH>), which found that up to 90% of Minnesotans who participated in the survey support government programs that help farmers implement soil-building practices. Poll respondents agreed that such policies would help everyone, including city dwellers, by keeping water clean, saving tax money spent on disaster relief, and ensuring a healthy food supply.

“Taxpayers want us to do the right thing for the environment. Let's get the federal government to act on that and put the money where the public really wants it, which is a better, healthier agriculture,” says Bernhardt.

Many beginning farmers, including farmers of color and immigrant farmers, are interested in using regenerative practices. Bernhardt emphasized the importance of racial equity in agricultural policy. She notes that the state of Minnesota is working with emerging farmers and the federal govern-

Voices, see page 9...

ment needs to be doing the same thing.

“Let’s talk to everyone who’s getting food on our table — farmers of color, migrant farmworkers — we need more diversity in who’s talking about farming and who’s able to access farmland,” Bernhardt says.

Coming together as community across differences can strengthen rural power at a time when some politicians are using racial rhetoric to divide folks and distract from government failure to address rural issues.

In order to shine a spotlight on these issues and on much-needed policy changes, People’s Action launched a video storytelling campaign through a platform called Soapboxx (<https://peoplesaction.soapboxx.us/campaign/winrural>), where people can easily upload 90-second videos by following a series of prompts. The goal is to highlight the voices of people in rural communities impacted by federal policy, but who are often left out of the conversation or *told* how to feel about it. This series of videos is a reminder that organizing people to take action is an important part of creating change from the ground up.

Ahrens made a video that described the

impact of a factory farm on his community’s economic stability and water quality. “When the factory farm fight came around, I saw a lot of people negatively affected who were



**“Taxpayers want us to do the right thing for the environment. Let’s get the federal government to act on that and put the money where the public really wants it, which is a better, healthier agriculture,” says livestock farmer Hannah Bernhardt. (LSP Photo)**

afraid to speak, and then others speaking bravely for our community and they didn’t have a lot of support,” he says. “And I thought, if they’re going to go to bat for us, I can’t sit at my house and eat Cheetos.”

He adds that federal agricultural policy is part of the problem. “Small farmers are working hard on soil health, but the factory farm down the road is subsidized 30 times as much. Farm policy at scale creates a com-

petitive disparity. It’s in everybody’s interest to start respecting our water. We’re polluting our most basic resource.”

Soden-Groves used his video to talk about a “Just Transition,” one that centers the needs of rural people as policy shifts away from subsidizing fossil fuel companies. “I live in a small town with a school district on the edge, people who are economically on the edge, and we need to make sure people’s needs are met as we move forward,” he says. “Our inclusion of one another and our needs becomes a foundation. We can have a shared joy in envisioning the future we are working toward together, where there is justice and where we are sustainable.”

The tagline on the video project is “this is how you win rural.” It is a message to decisionmakers that earning the support of rural communities requires listening to real people and developing federal policy that is people-centered, not corporate-driven. We can all play a role in highlighting the vibrancy

of rural communities and in demanding that the government works for the people it represents. □

*Jessica Kochick is an LSP policy organizer. If you are interested in making your own video about an issue in your community, contact Kochick at [jkochick@landstewardshipproject.org](mailto:jkochick@landstewardshipproject.org) or 612-400-6349.*

## Join LSP’s 2021 Virtual Organizing & Social Change Cohort

In early 2021, the Land Stewardship Project is launching its 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Organizing and Social Change Cohort. The cohort will be a powerful opportunity to further develop the leadership and organizing skills we collectively need in order to democratize a food and healthcare system that works for all people, the land, animals, and the environment. It will be held virtually via 10 Zoom sessions from late January until early April.

Through this cohort: **identify** your own motivations and what holds you back from building the collective power needed to accomplish our shared vision; **deepen** your understanding of structures of oppression and how they impact each of us and our communities; **create** ways to change the story about the biggest challenges our communities face; **grow** organizing skills to challenge corporate power and win positive change for people and the land; **unite** as leaders to advance strategic issue campaigns that transform our food and farming system; and **engage** with a growing network of Land Stewardship Project member-leaders across the Midwest.

For more information and to register, see <https://bit.ly/36kKeZS> or contact LSP’s Amanda Koehler at 612-400-6355, [akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org](mailto:akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org). □

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week. The Lifeline is committed to improving crisis services and advancing suicide prevention by empowering individuals, advancing professional best practices, and building awareness. Call **1-800-273-8255**.

### LSP Farm Crisis Resources

Feeling stressed or know someone who is? Check out LSP’s list of hotlines, websites, and other resources at [www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmercrisis](http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmercrisis).