

People-Powered Climate Solutions

Farmers Take Action on the Greatest Ecological Crisis of Our Time

By Jessica Kochick

For years, Tom Cotter has been a leader in the soil health movement, using cover cropping, diverse rotations, and managed rotational grazing to produce crops and raise livestock on his farm near Austin, in southern Minnesota. Recent high school graduate Claudia Lenz grew up on her family's vegetable Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm near the western Wisconsin community of Star Prairie, and is a youth activist focused on agricultural solutions to climate change. Both Land Stewardship Project members are part of LSP's new Soil Health and Climate Organizing Committee, which organizes to win soil health and regenerative agriculture policy at all levels of government.

Climate change is impacting all of us, no matter our age or where we live. But on a day-to-day basis, it especially affects farmers. As Cotter notes, addressing it "is going to help farmers be more profitable when faced with extreme weather, working with Mother Nature, not against. We need to do something now, before it's too late."

While our farmers are facing additional challenges due to unpredictable and extreme weather, LSP is committed to policy and organizing that recognizes them as key drivers in making agriculture part of the climate solution. The beauty of the Soil Health and Climate Organizing Committee is that it is a powerful cross-program team that marries LSP's Bridge to Soil Health Program work with the Policy Department's efforts at the state and federal level.

It consists of farmers, as well as rural, and urban members with experience in regenerative practices, lobbying, and community organizing. Launching the team remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge, but members have managed

to develop a survey (*see page 11*), reach out to other affected groups, and lead a series of listening sessions to gain feedback on priorities. This process will help determine LSP's soil health and climate policy agenda.

What We've Learned

Based on outreach efforts, the committee identified strong support for farming programs that incentivize soil health practices and compensate farmers for the ecosystem services they provide. In surveys, members



Tom Cotter says he and other farmers see the negative impacts of climate change every day. "We need to do something now, before it's too late," he says. (Photo by Dodd Demas)

and supporters expressed the need to tie government agriculture programs, like federally subsidized crop insurance, to sustainable farming practices. "If we change policy at the Farm Bill level, it'll make a bigger difference," says Cotter.

Soil health and climate policy intersect with many other issues that impact rural communities and span the food system — issues like land access, local market development, and concerns about factory farms. Some members of the committee focus on holding factory farms accountable for their pollution and carbon emissions, and on transitioning to a regenerative food system that gets more farmers on the land to provide healthy food for local communities.

Lenz, who was instrumental in organiz-

ing an LSP Youth Summit in 2018, wants to see more small farms and a cap on farm size. "Caps on farm size are a big thing because you look at the output of gas it takes to run these operations, and it destroys the soil with all the monocropping and lack of diversification," she says. "I'd love to see a program put in place that helps farmers transition from monocropping to something better."

Lenz would also like to see more support for small, beginning farmers trying to access land. In fact, committee members of all ages have expressed this priority: it needs to be easier and more economically viable to pass land from one generation to the next, either to a family member or another young person who wants to begin farming in a sustainable way. Otherwise, as farmers retire, land will become more consolidated.

Committee member Molly Schaus has worked as the farm director at Big River

Farms, a Food Group initiative that trains new immigrants and others looking to get started in fruit and vegetable production.

"I want a community-based food system that explicitly supports farmers of color and immigrant farmers," she says. "I want local farms whose owners and workers are well-paid and healthy, whose growing practices and crops reflect the diversity and agricultural expertise of our community. If we have this food system, we will all be healthier and our ecosystem will be healthier."

At the State Level

This fall, in collaboration with Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), which is LSP's sister political action organization, the committee held a town hall meeting with several Minnesota state

legislative candidates to support candidate education on climate issues in agriculture. In attendance were Representative Todd Lippert (Northfield) and Senate candidates Aleta Borrud (Rochester) and Michelle Lee (Moose Lake). During the 2021 state legislative session, the organizing committee will work with legislative allies and build power in communities in order to develop and pass soil health and climate legislation.

At the Federal Level

The Soil Health and Climate Organizing Committee has been working in collaboration with LSP's Federal Policy Steering Committee to advocate for our priorities

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with the Minnesota Congressional delegation. We joined our partner, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, to gather signatures on a policy letter (<https://bit.ly/2VM2d5u>). In August, the letter, which was signed by 2,100 U.S. farmers and ranchers, was delivered to the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.

In addition, LSP members have joined federal lobbying efforts to share innovative crop rotation and cover cropping practices, to show how severe weather damages their vegetable crops, and to advocate for policy that invests in farmers and local communities. For Karin and Dana Jokela of Sogn Valley Farm in southeastern Minnesota, this hits close to home for their vegetable operation.

"This year our farm was hit by a fast and furious hailstorm," says Karin. "Farms across the nation are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the hazardous impacts of climate change. We need collective, landscape-scale adoption of conservation practices to mitigate the impacts of future extreme

weather events, and to build economic and ecological resilience in rural communities."

One exciting example of a proactive policy proposal is the Agriculture Resilience Act, authored by Chellie Pingree, a U.S. Representative from Maine. It would expand funding and add soil health and climate criteria for working lands conservation programs, invest in transitioning to alternative manure management programs, and increase set-asides for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

LSP's Soil Health and Climate Organizing Committee asked Minnesota U.S. Representative Angie Craig to support the Agriculture Resilience Act.

"We felt it was important because it would incentivize extensive implementation of more sustainable, regenerative farming practices," says Jokela.



The pepper crop on Sogn Valley Farm in Minnesota was exposed to severe storm damage in 2020. "Farms across the nation are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the hazardous impacts of climate change," says Sogn Valley's Karin Jokela. (Photo by Karin Jokela)

Next Steps

The Land Stewardship Project is committed to working in partnership with farmers, allied organizations, and policymakers to build a broad base of folks that can win policy that supports a regenerative and eq-

uitable farm and food system. Organizing is essential to making sure that the voices and experiences of people living and working across Minnesota and beyond are included.

"In all of these issues, we need to remember that there's people behind it," says Lenz. "Whatever change we make, whether good or bad, it's going to have an impact on someone. If we want to make real effective change, we need to look at people first."

Tom Cotter agrees that when it comes to long-term change, it's about people-to-people connections. "It's just one farmer at a time is what it takes," he says, "two or three spread to two or three more." □

Jessica Kochick is an LSP policy organizer. If you are interested in getting involved in the Land Stewardship Project's soil health and climate policy work, contact LSP's Amanda Koehler at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6355, or Kochick at jkochick@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6349.

Carbon Farming's Climate Change Potential

The Land Stewardship Project recently published "Farming to Capture Carbon & Address Climate Change Through Building Soil Health," a white paper by George Boody that describes how farming systems that build healthy soil can lower greenhouse gases while reducing water pollution.

The paper, which includes several state and federal policy recommendations, is at www.landstewardshipproject.org/carbonfarming.

A Future Based on Healthy Soil: Survey Taps into Farming's Role in Mitigating Climate Change

To learn more about the climate and soil health-related experiences and perspectives of farmers as well as rural and urban community members across Minnesota, this fall the Land Stewardship Project's Soil Health and Climate Organizing Committee developed and distributed a survey. By December, LSP had received 250 survey responses from members and supporters, both by mail and in digital form. You can find the survey here: <http://bit.ly/LSPclimate>.

Here are a few of the responses LSP has received:

Why is building soil health and/or mitigating the climate crisis important to you?

- "I live here and would like the grandkids to be able to live here, grow their own food, and not be endangered with every breath — maybe even swim and fish safely."

- "Soil health is one of the best and biggest solutions to climate change, and it will also bring many more rural people into the work

on the solutions we need to protect our lives and futures in Minnesota, the U.S., and worldwide. Love the phrase SOILution!"

- "I am a beginning farmer and am already experiencing challenges brought by climate change. I'm invested in holding our leaders accountable to preventing the climate crisis from going completely out of control, and to developing mitigation strategies for Midwestern farmers."

What opportunities do you see in public policy to promote soil health and to mitigate climate change through carbon sequestration?

- "Stop fueling big ag and divest those funds to regenerative farmers. Increase the farm-to-school produce program. Promote organic and regeneratively produced products."

- "All farm subsidies should be tied to soil health practices. We also need stronger incentives and support for adopting more sustainable practices. As a food consumer, I would like to see a regenerative farming certification that I can trust to help me make informed purchases."

- "Voting in soil conservation and climate concerned policymakers."