

2021 State Legislature

LSP Members Push Soil Health, Rural Resiliency

By Amanda Koehler

During the 2021 session of the Minnesota Legislature, thousands of Land Stewardship Project members from across the state were united in our vision for a sustainable and just farm and food system, as well as healthy communities.

For example, one of LSP's priorities was the introduction of the "100% Soil-Healthy Farming Bill." The legislation, which was introduced in February by Representative Todd Lippert (DFL-Northfield) in the House and Senator Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) in the Senate, was crafted by LSP farmer-members from throughout Minnesota.

The legislation sets statewide goals and creates a program to provide farmers with accessible grants and direct payments for the adoption of practices that build resiliency on the landscape by, among other things, sequestering carbon long-term and contributing to mitigating climate change.

Bridging the gap to ensure that soil healthy practices like managed rotational grazing, cover cropping, perennial cropping, and no-till systems are profitable in the near term removes financial barriers that often limit farmers' ability to put in place these measures. Under the 100% Soil-Healthy proposal, the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) would administer the grants and provide technical assistance to Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Up to five years of direct payments would be provided.

The goal of the legislation is to have 50% and 100% of Minnesota farmers implementing soil-healthy practices by 2030 and 2035, respectively. In addition, by 2040 100% of the state's grazable and tillable acres would be farmed utilizing such practices. Experience in states like Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa has shown that public cost-share and grant programs can play a significant role in increasing the number of acres being managed utilizing soil-healthy practices.

During the 2021 legislative session,

members supported this groundbreaking soil health proposal by testifying in front of committees, calling and e-mailing lawmakers, writing letters-to-the-editor, doing literature drops, and participating in virtual town hall meetings organized by LSP.

The 2021 session of the Legislature focused on developing a two-year budget. As this *Land Stewardship Letter* went to press, a general budget deal had been reached, and lawmakers were headed into a special session to hammer out their differences on various proposals. Although the 100% Soil-Healthy Bill did not become law this year, as of this writing elements of it were still on the table in other legislative proposals.



Farmers like southeastern Minnesota crop and livestock producer John Snyder utilize practices like cover cropping to build soil resiliency. LSP's "100% Soil-Healthy" legislative proposals support getting more practices like this established on more acres. (Photo by Dodd Demas)

Overall, when it comes to LSP's priorities, there was a wide gap between the House and Senate versions of legislation. The next few pages summarize the status of various provisions and why LSP focused on them. A final report on where things shook out after the special session will be at www.landstewardshipproject.org this summer.

◆ Soil-Healthy Farming

By ensuring our farmers have all the resources they need to implement soil-healthy

practices, we can build rural resiliency and boost farm income.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- Establish a statewide soil-healthy farming goal that at least 30% of Minnesota farmland includes cover crops, perennial crops, no-till, or managed rotational grazing by 2030 to boost farm income, build soil health, prevent or minimize erosion and runoff, retain and clean water, sequester carbon, support pollinators, and increase farm resiliency. This is an adjusted goal from LSP's original 100% Soil-Healthy Farming Bill proposal.

- Establish a Soil Health Cost Share Program and appropriate \$1 million to the program. This is a BWSR proposal, with the addition of some language borrowed from LSP's 100% Soil-Healthy Farming Bill. We would be working with BWSR to ensure these funds are prioritized for farmers who need them most: small and mid-sized farmers and emerging farmers, as well as women, veterans, persons with disabilities, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and members of communities of color.

- \$11.3 million for implementation of soil-healthy practices via the Clean Water Fund. In partnership with legislative allies, LSP has successfully included some language from our 100% Soil-Healthy Farming Bill and ensured that farmers who rent land can access these dollars. We would work with BWSR to ensure these funds are prioritized for farmers who need them most.

- \$4.5 million for the University of Minnesota's Forever Green Initiative.

- Require a \$25 fee on certain housing filings as a step toward equitable and consistent funding for Soil and Water Conservation Districts, regardless of zip code.

Minnesota Senate Proposals:

- \$4 million for the Forever Green Initiative.

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- Slash the budget of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Sustainable Ag Demonstration Grant initiative, a program that for years LSP members have fought for.

◆ Supporting Small & Mid-Sized Farmers & Holding Corporate Ag Accountable

As farmers across the state attempt to rebound from the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, six years of low prices, and consolidation across the industry, our state must provide immediate support for farmers in financial stress and work to address the root causes of these challenges.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- \$574,000 for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Farm Advocates Program. For many years, LSP has been advocating for increased funding for this program — this is a step in the right direction.
- \$1.268 million for dairy development, profitability enhancement, and dairy business planning grants.
- Extend the farmer-lender mediation period from 60 to 90 days. LSP has been advocating for more time — however, this is a step in the right direction.
- Extend from 90 to 120 days the period a creditor and the creditor's successors may not begin or continue proceedings to enforce a debt against agricultural property after a mediation request is filed. This is a step in the right direction.

Minnesota Senate Proposals:

- Eliminate and limit restrictions for spreading factory-farmed manure. This proposal serves just a handful of large operations and their wealthy investors, supporting an industry that is running small and mid-sized farms out of business, forcing rural communities to foot the bill to clean up detrimental impacts on human health and the environment.
- Increase "efficiency" of environmental review and permitting of industrial projects like factory farms and frac sand mines. This idea continues to put corporations above people and the land.
- Limit the rights of people to petition

for environmental review of industrial projects like factory farms or frac sand mines. This is a bad idea: projects undertaken in one county can significantly impact downstream or downwind communities across the state.

- \$494,000 for the Farm Advocates Program. This is a step in the right direction, but the House proposal is stronger.
- \$1.268 million for dairy development, profitability enhancement, and dairy business planning grants. This matches the House proposal.
- The Senate is proposing nothing to continue protection of farmers in financial stress by, for example, extending deadlines in the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act. In 2020, LSP pushed for a bill to extend these deadlines; it passed unanimously.

◆ Investing in Our Local & Regional Food Systems

By creating a robust and safe network of local processors and expanding local markets for farm products, including public institutional buying, we bring jobs to rural communities, bolster farm income, and build a more resilient and healthier farm and food system for all of us.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- \$1.6 million for the Farm-to-School Program, which LSP members have been advocating for since 2019. This is a significant increase from the amount appropriated in 2019.
- \$1 million for start-up, modernization, or expansion of meat, poultry, egg, and milk processing facilities. Preferably, this funding will be prioritized to rebuild a robust network of small processors across the countryside to bolster local food systems, bring jobs to rural Minnesota, and keep our dollars in our communities.
- Creating the Safe Workplaces for Meat & Poultry Processing Act to protect workers from exploitation and unsafe work environments, championed by the Union of Food and Commercial Workers.
- Establish a grant program to help farmers finance cooperatives that organize for purposes of operating a processing facility or marketing an agricultural product or agricultural service.

Minnesota Senate Proposals:

- \$1 million for the Farm-to-School Program. This is a small increase from the amount appropriated in 2019. It's a step in the right direction, but the House proposal is stronger.
- Cut over \$600,000 from the Urban Agriculture Grant Program.
- Cut over \$300,000 from the Good Food Access Program.

◆ Robust Rural Healthcare

Rural Minnesotans face some of the worst disparities in accessing the healthcare they need. Our current health insurance system is a huge, costly barrier to prosperity, sustainability, and health in our state and nation. Access—for everyone—to affordable, quality healthcare is critical if we are to have communities where sustainable, family farm-based agriculture thrives.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- Require a proposal for developing a public option insurance program for all people, no exceptions, which is a strong step toward ensuring Minnesotans have truly affordable, high-quality, accessible healthcare.
- Seek a study to determine more tax efficient ways to pay medical providers to ensure the vitality and survival of our rural health systems.
- Establish a Prescription Drug Affordability Board and Council to provide financial relief to people facing the burden of high prescription drugs costs.
- Strengthen public review of proposed hospital closures.
- Require transparency from managed care organizations by asking the Minnesota Department of Health to report on how it reimburses providers in our public insurance programs.

Minnesota Senate Proposals:

- The Senate has a handful of small proposals that are helpful, but ultimately do not address the scale or roots of the challenges Minnesotans are facing.

Policy & Organizing

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- Invest in the “reinsurance” plan, demanded by insurance companies. Reinsurance protects insurance companies from losing money by having the state pay for some of the most expensive patients. Rather than come from a tax on the industry, this money comes out of Minnesota’s public funds.

For more on healthcare issues related to the 2021 legislative session, see page 11.

◆ Emerging & Beginning Farmers

We must invest in getting more farmers on the land, facilitating generational transitions of land and assets, and advancing racial, gender, and economic justice in the farming system. Emerging farmer proposals have been championed by the Latino Economic Development Center and the Hmong American Farmers Association.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- Establish an Emerging Farmer Account and appropriate \$20,000 to it.
- Create an emerging farmer office and hire a fulltime emerging farmer outreach coordinator; appropriate \$300,000 to this work.
- Establish a pilot project that creates farmland access teams to provide technical assistance to potential beginning farmers.
- Increase the Beginning Farmer Tax Credit rate from 5% to 10% for sale of land or agricultural assets to socially disadvantaged farmers — Black, Brown, Indigenous, women, and disabled farmers.
- Allow for 5% of the funds allocated for the Beginning Farmer Tax Credit to be used for administration and to develop an online application.

Senate Proposals:

- \$1 million for grants for beginning farmers.

◆ Healthy Pollinators

Our farm and food system depends on our pollinator populations, which are fast dwindling. It’s clear the survival of these valuable insects is threatened by certain pesticides and seed treatments, such as neonicotinoids. Farmers will be unable to feed our communities or provide economic benefits to our state without stewarding the health of our pollinators.

Minnesota House Proposals:

- Require a written warning on packaging for neonicotinoid-treated seed.
- Ban on selling seed treated or coated with neonicotinoids as food, feed, oil, or ethanol feedstock.



Using social media memes like this one, along with virtual town halls, e-mails, telephone calls, letters-to-the editor, media stories, and radio ads, LSP members made it clear to lawmakers during the 2021 legislative session that a public good like soil health deserves public support.

- Ban on disposal of seed treated or coated with neonicotinoids in a manner not consistent with the product label, or near a drinking water source, surface water, in compost, or by incineration within a home or other dwelling.
- Fund rulemaking for treated seed disposal.
- Restore to local communities control over pollinator-lethal pesticides.

Minnesota Senate Proposals:

- None.

◆ Clean Energy

Minnesota House Proposal:

- Become the next state committed to a pathway to 100% clean, equitable energy and a fully decarbonized electrical sector by 2040. We deserve an equitable clean energy future for everyone in our state.
- Invest in solar installations in public spaces such as schools, state parks, and state buildings, and remove barriers to installing solar systems on farmland.
- Direct the Public Utilities Commission to produce a report that determines the social, environmental, and economic costs of carbon life cycle emissions from renewable natural gas, manure methane, power-to-ammonia, district energy, and other technologies. This information will be vital in clearly outlining what technologies are worth our investment and calculating the societal costs of false solutions.

- Inclusion of language proposed by CenterPoint Energy that includes exploring burning methane from factory farm manure and other industrial facilities to ensure that CenterPoint can continue to use and charge customers for upkeep of its pipelines. This is the wrong direction to go — we need to invest in energy that is truly clean, not false solutions. Non-fossil-fuel-based natural gases still release potent greenhouse gases, are expensive, and prop up industries such as factory farms that harm small and mid-sized farmers, as well as our air, water, and land. Unlike the Senate version, the House version does not prioritize manure-based gas technologies. However, both the Senate and House versions ignore setting goals for decarbonizing energy.

Minnesota Senate Proposal:

- Inclusion of language proposed by CenterPoint Energy described earlier. The Senate prioritizes renewable natural gas or methane-based fuels over cleaner technologies such as strategic electrification. While efforts to decarbonize the fossil fuel sector are appreciated, this bill does not move Minnesota closer to a more sustainable future and perpetuates harms against rural communities. □

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