

LSP PRIORITY

Farmland Down Payment Assistance

THE PROGRAM

The Minnesota Farmland Down Payment Assistance Program was established in 2022. During the 2023 legislative session, LSP, Midwest Farmers of Color Collective, Latino Economic Development Center, and others worked to update statutory language for the program. We won additional funding for the program, a required 30-day application period, and prioritization of emerging farmer applicants.

In August 2023, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture implemented these changes by having a two-tiered lottery. First, they chose qualified emerging farmer applicants from the lottery until they were out of qualified emerging farmer applicants, then they chose qualified non-emerging farmer applicants from the lottery.

Because only \$1 million per year is available for this program, only 66 of 172 applications were able to be funded in August 2023.



WHAT IS AN EMERGING FARMER?

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture defines emerging farmers as women, veterans, persons with disabilities, BIPOC, young (35 and younger), LGBTQIA+, urban (residing in a city with a population over 5,000), and others as determined by the Commissioner.

Based on the 2022 Ag Census, released in February 2024, over 30% of MN farmers are women, 7.8% are veterans, 1.5% are BIPOC, and 9.5% are under 35. There is no data available on LGBTQIA+ or urban farmers.

THE LAWSUIT

Pacific Legal Foundation, a California-based conservative legal group, recruited a Northern Minnesota farmer who applied to the program and did not receive grant funding in August 2023 to sue the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, claiming “discrimination”.



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WHAT'S AT THE CORE OF THIS?

The ultimate problem with this program is not that it prioritizes emerging farmers, but that the demand for the program wildly exceeds available funding. In 2023, 66 of 172 applications were able to be funded. It would have taken \$2.58 million to fund all qualified applicants, 2.5x the current available funding, which is \$1 million per year. Imagine if the MDA was able to award every qualified applicant a Down Payment Assistance Grant.

But we have to zoom out further, as this is the case across the board. While big ag swallows up a large majority of public funding in our farm and food system, small- and mid-sized farms are left fighting over the crumbs. For example, the 2024-25 Minnesota Agriculture Budget included \$25 million for biofuel incentives and infrastructure, but only \$4.375 million for grants and services for beginning and emerging farmers. Our local, state, and federal budgets demonstrate that our public officials, as a whole, prioritize big ag over getting more farmers on the land, investing in regenerative and sustainable practices, and rebuilding our local and regional food systems.

This lawsuit is a distraction. In fact, this is not an isolated lawsuit. The 2022 Ag Census shows significantly fewer farmers on the land and skyrocketing consolidation. To keep us fighting over the scraps, corporate interests pit emerging farmers and small- and mid-sized non-emerging farmers against each other with culture wars. When we are divided, keep us divided and prevent us from building people power together to transform farm and food system policy.

Now is the time to push back against the scarcity we are being handed and tell public officials what small- to mid-sized farms really need to be successful. The resources are there to meet the needs of all aspiring, beginning, emerging, small-, mid-sized, and regenerative farmers. It's just not being spent on us.

Rather than scapegoating emerging farmers, we have an opportunity to build solidarity across identities to change how the system is failing all of us. Together we can build power to ensure that the majority of public funding in our farm and food system goes toward the needs of aspiring, beginning, emerging, small-, mid-sized, and regenerative farmers, not just big ag.

Our vision is to make Minnesota the best place to start a farm by providing the resources, capital, training, and technical assistance that aspiring, beginning, and emerging farmers need to start and sustain successful farms. Those who want to farm should be able to access land and start, grow, and sustain their farm business. Let's realize this vision together.



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